# 新・天地無用！

## 関島眞頼

イラスト　大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

# Tenchi in Tokyo
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For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

# TLDR Summary:

Story 1: Sakuya wants to get closer to tenchi by getting something for them to have in common to talk about. They find Washu selling a genetically altered chipmunk and buy it. He opens up but then the chipmunk, named Okoyama becomes a miniature human girl and then a fairy and begins cooking dinner and Sakuya gets jealous and on a date to a shinto shrine she wishes for Okoyama to disappear. The fairy gets sick immediately. Sakuya blames herself, but Washu calls to let them know the life span of her creation is only a month. Okayama dies, Tenchi confesses his feelings about the whole situation and notices Sakuya was wearing a short skirt to get his attention. Sakuya quits calling Tenchi by only Tenchi-kun and goes back to calling him the less informal Masaki-kun. Unhappy End.

Story 2: Sasami contemplates what love is and announces her love for tenchi to the group, from this she realizes she doesn't really know what love is. Ryo ohki tells her to call Tenchi and they arrange for her to meet up with Sakuya and him in Tokyo. Sakuya decides to go to get her hair done at a famous salon and leaves them alone to catch up but makes "a magic circle" around them and tells them not to leave it. Over 14 different groups of people come and sit on the bench with them all in love of different styles and sasami learns the vast scope of love and finally an old woman, grieving her long dead daughter who looked like sasami, comes and teaches her that love is seeing a future with someone and wanting to work towards it. Sakuya shows back up 4 hours later after dark, remarking that the hair salon was horrid. Happy End.

Story 3: Ryoko binge drinks to suppress her rage, and eventually the suppression fails and she goes to Washu to ask her to help her kill a man. Washu asks for clarification as to who she wants her to kill, it's a cold. Tenchi has a cold and she wants the cold virus to suffer for hurting her man. She invents a new medicine and they give it to Tenchi. His soul leaves his body, ryoko goes to shuibuya looking for a convenience store and gets lost for an hour and finds a street punk tenchi beating up people and swoons. Then she sees a pickup artist tenchi hitting on girls, then a nerdy pimple-faced highschooler tenchi beats that tenchi up, a tenchi preaching vaguely every religion at once comes out and makes noise on the street. She flies back to Tenchi's apartment to find him there. Washu explains the tenchi's she met were Tenchi's soul manifesting in ways to explore his latent desires. Washu's cold medicine was an astral projection medicine that took the sickness with it by having the soul leave the body. Ryoko

literally goes looney tunes from hearing this. Washu concludes that the four tenchi's must be from the medicine curing Tenchi's back pain, athlete's foot, acne, and weak bladder.

Washu becomes thrilled at making a miracle drug. Ryoko asks her when Tenchi's souls will go back. "Never, They won't; he's permanently half dead.".That doesn't work for Ryoko so washu goes off to research a cure. She makes a machine to put the spirit parts back into tenchi ryoko goes and finds them around town knocks them out and puts them back in, the final one she puts in is tenchis violent side who she knocks out and breaks out of jail, once she gets him in she finds there's still a part missing. The part that loves her. She finds him in the crack of the floor boards and restores tenchi back to who he normally is with newfound respect for all the parts of him he represses. But restoring that part gave Tenchi a cold again so the whole ordeal was for nothing. Unhappy End.

# Sakuya's Confession

Kamishiro Sakuya was troubled.

She was troubled more deeply than the ocean.

Whether that ocean was the shallow Ariake Sea or the Mariana Trench at ten thousand one hundred and thirty-four meters depth was certainly a worthy subject of investigation, but in any case, she had not agonized so seriously since three days ago, when she had spent all of fifteen seconds deliberating between Vongole Rosso and Peperoncino at a spaghetti restaurant in Daikanyama.

"I can't believe Kamishiro's actually down in the dumps!" her classmates would have cried had they seen her.

"This is the most astonishing thing since the creation of the world!"

"Surely it's a sign — Is the Great Kanto Earthquake, or Mount Fuji about to erupt!?"

Sakuya's mind had never been built for deep thought. Philosophical questions like "existence," "infinity," or "the self-propagation of ideas" had never once crossed her mind since birth, and neither the dissonance of high school life nor the troubles of living alone at sixteen had ever creased her brow.

She believed firmly that taking a nap was far more beneficial to her life than brooding over problems.

Her favorite weather was clear sky without a single cloud, but overcast rainy-season skies and the melancholy patter of autumn rain didn't bother her as much as others claimed.

She loved festivals, but she had enough sensitivity to savor the quiet emptiness after a festival was over.

Of course, she had no interest in the distant past or far-off future.

What interested her was only the happiness, joy, and fun of today and tomorrow — and Hello Kitty's mood.

She was a first-year student at Tenmangu High School, a private school in Shibuya notorious for being the most pickup-artist-ridden school around.

A modern girl, a city girl, a Tokyo girl, the quintessential Shibuya schoolgirl...

And on top of all that, until this very day, Sakuya had never had a "problem" worth troubling herself over.

Her looks weren't merely passable — she was frankly a gorgeous girl on par with an idol.

Without even cramming, her brain was developed enough not to fail tests.

Her relationships at school, her friendships — all reasonably smooth.

She wasn't tone-deaf enough to embarrass herself at karaoke, and she wasn't clumsy enough to fail at "Tail Concerto."[1]

Her body was in excellent health, she had no food dislikes whatsoever, her cramps were on the lighter side, and she had neither a milk allergy nor an atopic constitution.

She didn't gain weight even if she overate, so she had no need to invest money in beauty treatments; she was also free from acne and didn't need to bulk-buy Clearasil Her eyesight was a precious 2.0 in this day and age.

In short, the lovable girl known as Kamishiro Sakuya was, in terms of her distance from suffering and anguish, something like the ideal image of humanity as God intended — a personification of positive thinking, a happy, healthy, cheerful, and innocent pleasure-seeker.

And yet… On the third Sunday of May, 9:47 in the morning.

At the back booth of a burger shop in Shibuya's Center District.

Sakuya sipped an M-sized orange juice while spending a troubling moment in unusual contemplation.

Just what was she troubled about?

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[1] A fun ps1 game for furrys.

The answer was obvious.

There was no need for elimination methods or deductive logic.

It was about her boyfriend.

If a shadow of worry had fallen for even an instant on the face of a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl blessed by the gods of pleasure, only a boyfriend could be the cause.

Yes — Sakuya felt dissatisfaction, impatience, and a faint loneliness because the relationship with her boyfriend, which had started about a month ago, showed no progress whatsoever.

And that boyfriend was sitting right in front of her now.

He was muttering something like "I wonder if this is really a hundred percent beef?" while earnestly devouring a morning cheeseburger.

His name was Tenchi Masaki.

Our very own Tenchi, as you know.

Around the middle of April, Sakuya had shamelessly fallen head over heels for this boy who had come alone from the countryside of Okayama to become her classmate at Tenmangu High.

"I've fallen in love with you," she had said — such bold words that had spilled unbidden from her lips that day.

The day when Tenchi, on his very first day as a transfer student, had no sooner sat down at his desk than the unfamiliar girl in the seat beside him abruptly declared her love — and he had been so startled he toppled over backward, chair and all.

"You looked like a pigeon hit by a bean pellet, Masaki-kun."

Remembering that fateful moment of their meeting, Sakuya gave a small, bitter smile.

(Come to think of it now, that was only natural.

I skipped all the preambles and formalities and went straight to it — maybe that was a little too much.

But I felt not the slightest hesitation or embarrassment.

Boldly, almost unnervingly so, as if it had always been decided that way, the words had naturally overflowed from my lips.

Because the instant I saw him, I thought: it can only be this person, there's no one else I could make my boyfriend.

Why? What on earth made me fall for Masaki-kun?

That sort of thing doesn't matter.

It's not about logic with these things.

I like him because I like him, and I confessed because I liked him.

That's all.

I don't regret it at all, of course.

I don't regret it, but…)

"Haah."

Sakuya turned her dreamy, moist eyes to the void and let out a small sigh.

In that instant, every male customer in the restaurant simultaneously looked at her.

Even the male half of a couple broke off his conversation to glance at Sakuya, and his girlfriend kicked him in the shin for it.

The hastily assembled guard of admirers surely thought: "You mustn't sigh! A beautiful girl like you — that sad face doesn't suit you at all!"

But Sakuya, far from being grateful for the men's attention, didn't even notice it, and went on drowning in her unaccustomed reverie while listlessly sipping her watered-down orange juice.

— Yes. But in the end, it's unrequited love, isn't it.

A little over a month since my confession.

Every weekend, I invite Masaki-kun on a date.

He always comes along, his expression somewhere between pleased, troubled, and shy.

On the surface, we seem to be in quite a good relationship.

Masaki-kun seems to be enjoying Tokyo sightseeing in his own way.

But I can't help wondering if the person walking beside him even needs to be me.

Maybe it would be fine if it were some other girl — or honestly, maybe he'd feel more relaxed with a guy.

Like he'd have a hundred times more fun making a fool of himself with Amagasaki-kun or Tsuchida-kun.

More than friends, less than lovers.

We really aren't lovers yet, are we, the two of us...

"Haah."

Sakuya sighed again.

Her languid voice, with its power to gently stir a man's heart, spread in waves to every corner of the shop, and the male customers once again looked at her all at once.

The boyfriend in one couple received a slap from his girlfriend.

Having made up her mind, Sakuya looked straight ahead.

Then, addressing Tenchi, who was muttering "This is a little too salty" while eating his french fries, she spoke up.

"Hey, Masaki-kun..."

"I need to cut back on salt at dinner tonight — huh!? Did you say something, Kamishiro-san!?"

Tenchi looked at Sakuya with an annoyingly untroubled smile.

"Hey."

Sakuya rested her chin in her hand on the table and said meaningfully:

"We never really become... hot and deep as a couple, do we."

The young man at the next table who looked like a salesman spewed his cola.

"Hot... deep... what's that mean!?"

Tenchi blinked in confusion.

"I don't know," Sakuya pouted. "Even if I did, I wouldn't say it. It's not for a girl to say."

"Is that so?"

"We've been together for a month already. Don't you think we should be a little more, you know — flirty, lovey-dovey, heart-pounding, intimate?"

"What kind of language is that!?"

Tenchi looked utterly bewildered.

The male customers throughout the shop had turned their whole bodies into ears, hanging on every word.

"For example," Sakuya said impatiently, leaning forward eagerly.

"Isn't it about time we started calling each other by our first names? Instead of 'Kamishiro-san' and 'Masaki-kun,' something like 'Sakuya' or 'Tenchi-kun'? It's a small thing, but I want that kind of deeper relationship — in other words, I want our love index to go up... in other words, I want to be closer to you, Masaki-kun."

"Tenchi-kun is fine, I suppose..."

Tenchi trailed off awkwardly.

"But I think I'm already pretty close to you, Kamishiro-san. You show me around everywhere on weekends."

"You won't even hold my hand."

"We walk home together every day."

"You won't drink juice from the same glass with two straws."

"I've never had breakfast with Amagasaki or Tsuchida."

"We're not lovey-dovey at all."

"I spend way more time with you than with Amagasaki."

"I guess... we're stuck at this point, for now."

Sakuya let the straw dangle in her mouth with a dissatisfied wiggle.

At the same moment, male customers throughout the shop breathed sighs of relief after listening in with bated breath.

— So the two of them are only at that stage. But what a dull fellow that guy is.

She's completely crazy about him.

If it were me, I'd be thrilled to deepen the relationship.

Can you really look at a beautiful girl like that and feel nothing at all!?

Don't you think about this, that, and everything else as a man!?

Their glances drifting between Tenchi and Sakuya said as much.

According to Amagasaki, Tenchi's classmate and close friend, when it came to romance, the creature called Tenchi Masaki was innocent, slow, oblivious, and indifferent — possessing no more emotional sensitivity than an elementary school child in the lower grades.

But Tenchi was no tree stump, stone Buddha, or asexual being.

He couldn't possibly feel nothing at being told "I like you" by a girl, and he wasn't so nearsighted as to miss Sakuya's adorableness.

That much was clear from the way he began to fidget uncomfortably, conscious of the male customers' stares (which Sakuya hadn't noticed but Tenchi had).

Her slightly upswept dark short hair, her somewhat tilted dark green coquettish eyes, her small, thin, mischievous lips, her breathtakingly fair skin, her slender limbs extending from her pale green trainer and black half-spats... Born male, was there any man alive who wouldn't feel his heart quicken at a girl as flawlessly beautiful as Sakuya?

Yet Tenchi always ran up against a wall when he tried to think about his relationship with Sakuya.

— Am I the kind of person who deserves to be liked by Kamishiro-san!?

Once, Tenchi had complained to Amagasaki about this.

"I think there's an imbalance. Think about it — I'm the embodiment of mediocrity and boredom, a country boy, and my only redeeming qualities are that I don't have a single cavity and I'm good at picking matsutake mushrooms. Compare that to Kamishiro-san, who is 'Number Three on the List of Girls at Tenmangu High You'd Most Want as a Girlfriend.' Number One and Two are the rich-girl type from Ashiya and the supermodel type, so for ordinary people like us, Kamishiro-san is effectively Number One. ...See!? Doesn't it seem off? We really aren't balanced at all, actually..."

Amagasaki had laughed it off as "a funny kind of humble brag," but Tenchi seemed to genuinely believe it.

He felt they were mismatched.

That thought was the premise of all his thinking.

So Sakuya's sincere expressions of affection, her girlish wishes, her provocative behavior — none of it sank straight into his heart; it all seemed to him, as he put it, to "not click."

And since they were "mismatched," any complaint Sakuya might have was entirely his fault...

He must have reached that conclusion.

Tenchi, who had been gazing apologetically at Sakuya, eventually dropped his eyes to the floor and said in a voice barely above a whisper:

"Sorry... I'm just a country boy."

It was a misguided, non-answer of an answer.

But the sincerity, the simplicity, the genuine good-heartedness came through unmistakably.

"It's not your fault, Masaki-kun."

Sakuya smiled with troubled kindness and added:

"...That's probably what I like about you."

At that instant, the male customers' jealous stares pierced through Tenchi's entire body like laser beams.

"L-let's go, Kamishiro-san."

Tenchi shuddered as though he sensed mortal danger, grabbed Sakuya's hand, and hastily stood up.

The moment her hand was taken, Sakuya gave a small "oh" of surprise, but Tenchi paid no attention, hurrying out the front door and dragging Sakuya into the crowds of the Center Gai.
Modern science is increasingly able to demonstrate that the human mind harbors unknown powers capable of producing physical phenomena through thought alone.

This is what is called psychic power, and it is said to be most strongly activated by thoughts of resentment and anger.

Tenchi, who had been bathed in the jealous thoughts of no fewer than twenty men, probably lost about three days off his lifespan.

That aside — Tenchi and Sakuya held hands.

Whatever the trigger, it was precisely the situation Sakuya had wished for, and outwardly it was nothing less than ascending one step of the staircase toward their "hot and deep relationship."

But of course, Sakuya wasn't happy at all.

Because there had been no "feeling" behind it.

(A Common Topic

— There's no common topic between us.)

That was the conclusion Sakuya arrived at, in her own way, as she swayed on the sooty trains of the Keio Inokashira Line.

(There's no common topic between us, so our conversations don't mesh, our hearts don't really connect, and we can't become any more intimate than this…)

"If there isn't one, I'll force one into existence!" Sakuya cried inside her heart, and in less than half a day she put it into action.

She bought a pet and forced it on the reluctant Tenchi.

Her analysis of the "lack of a common topic" was probably correct.

But there was a certain leap in logic in the conclusion that this led to "giving a pet as a gift."

Quintessentially Sakuya — though in fact, there were circumstances that led her to that conclusion.

Tenchi and Sakuya had left the burger shop in Center-gai and headed straight to Shibuya Station, where they boarded the Keio Inokashira Line.

Their destination: Kichijoji, the final stop.

On Sakuya's suggestion, it was Tenchi's first time since coming to Tokyo to leave the 23 wards, to explore Inokashira Park in Kichijoji.

Despite being a Sunday afternoon, the train was relatively uncrowded, with seats scattered open across the long benches.

Honey-like sunlight streamed through the windows, and outside, the white walls of quiet upscale residential neighborhoods blurred softly under a sky that hurt the eyes with its May brightness.

Sakuya, sitting on the seat and letting herself sway languidly with the train, glanced at Tenchi beside her.

Tenchi was absorbed in reading the "1998 Rurubu Tokyo" guidebook.

Sakuya tilted herself and leaned gently against Tenchi.

No reaction whatsoever.

Apparently, the weight and warmth of a beautiful girl's body couldn't interest Tenchi more than "1998 Rurubu Tokyo."

"You don't need that thing. I know Kichijoji from corner to corner," Sakuya said, taking the book from Tenchi's hand and stuffing it irritably into her daypack.

"Do you even know what Kichijoji means to me, Masaki-kun? It's my trump card."

"Your trump card!?" Tenchi tilted his head in puzzlement.

"Yes. There's a legend that Inokashira Park enshrines the Goddess Benten, and couples who visit will be torn apart by Benten's jealousy."

"Really," Tenchi said, his eyes widening with interest. "Even in a big city like Tokyo, that kind of legend survives?"

"Don't just find it interesting. I don't believe in legends, but for a girl, going there takes a certain resolve. But I couldn't think of anywhere else to take you, Masaki-kun..."

"Come to think of it, you've taken me to so many places."

Ignoring Sakuya's pout, Tenchi counted on his fingers with a calm face.

"The first Saturday was Shibuya. Sunday was Harajuku, Monday after school was Shimokitazawa. Then Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, Aoyama, Roppongi, Ginza, Odaiba, Tokyo Tower, Senso-ji in Asakusa, the Thorn-Removing Jizo in Sugamo, the used bookshop district in Ochanomizu, the Museum of Salt and Tobacco... and yesterday was the Meguro Parasitological Museum."

"That place was kind of a trump card too... but as a date spot it was the absolute worst. Ugh." Sakuya swallowed the nausea that rose in her throat, and Tenchi gave her a warm smile of gratitude.

"Thank you, Kamishiro-san. If it had been just me, I could never have seen so many places in such a short time. After all, I'd never been east of the Tenryu River before, let alone to Tokyo. If it's not too much trouble, would you continue showing me around?"

"With pleasure!" Sakuya shouted in response, and turned away.

Of course, the words "with pleasure" couldn't be taken at face value.

They employed the advanced emotional expression known as "sarcasm."

Sakuya's true feeling was: — I'm not a JTB tour guide, you know.

Inokashira Park — officially known as the Tokyo Metropolitan Inokashira Onshi Park.

It occupied some 354,000 square meters to the south of Kichijoji Station, preserving the beautiful Musashino woodland of mixed deciduous trees that the author Kunikida Doppo had loved.

Promenades wound through the lush greenery, and a park pond where carp swam, a small zoo, and amusement facilities were scattered throughout, making it a beloved urban oasis for Tokyoites.

Moreover, because of its vast grounds, stepping off the promenade and into the woodland quickly reduced human traffic — in that sense, it was also a delightful dating spot.

Tenchi seemed to be quite taken with the scenery.

"What a lovely place," he murmured as they strolled among the towering broadleaf trees with their widely spreading branches, a nostalgic note in his voice.

"I never knew Tokyo still had natural places like this. It feels like walking in the hills behind my house in Okayama. I'm glad I came..."

"I'm glad too."

Drawn by Tenchi's smile, Sakuya smiled happily.

The call of a cuckoo echoed wetly.

A great oak rustled its branches with a sound like a rising tide.

The patches of sunlight on the ground glittered and danced in time.

The cool breeze that stroked her smiling face felt pleasant to Sakuya.

But she couldn't keep smiling forever.

Today, Sakuya had the sacred mission of "forcibly creating a common topic with Tenchi."

(If he's taken such a liking to this park, Sakuya thought. Maybe there's a topic hidden in the park.Like, Masaki-kun seeing this park reminded him of his hometown of Okayama. If I started talking about Okayama, I bet he'd be thrilled. But what do I actually know about Okayama!? Peaches, kibi dango rice cakes, Okayama Prefectural Baseball Stadium…)

"No good at all. This level of knowledge is completely inadequate."
Sakuya hunched her shoulders in a quiet mutter, then hurried to catch up with Tenchi.

Tenchi was walking along gazing at the trees blazing with fresh green growth all around them, continually expressing admiration.

"What magnificent old Yoshino cherry trees. The blossoms must be beautiful in spring when they're in full bloom. Oak, beech, ura-shiro-gashi, kobushi... hana-kaido, zelkova, takao maple... jincho-ge, ichi-i... oh, there's even yabu-sanzashi. The fruit of that one is delicious."

— Masaki-kun knows a lot about plants.

As a common topic, it's outdoorsy and a bit stylish.

But I'm not good with that kind of thing. I can't even tell the difference between dandelions and chrysanthemums, and until quite recently I thought the kanji for "ginkgo" was written as "stomach-intestines"...

Thinking this, Sakuya pulled four hundred-yen coins from her wallet.

She needed to pay the Inokashira Natural Cultural Garden entrance fee.

The Inokashira Natural Cultural Garden occupied a small corner of the western part of the park, focused primarily on small animals like raccoons, tanuki, fennec foxes, and guinea pigs, as well as birds, and also featuring Hanako, Japan's longest-lived elephant.

Inside, couples and families were enjoying encounters with the animals in their own ways.

"A monkey! A goat! A boar! There's even a wallaby!"

"You're just describing what you see, Kamishiro-san."

Both their faces broke into natural smiles.

Especially in a place called the "chipmunk Path," both of them lit up with the pure delight of children.

It was a giant oval cage stretching nearly a hundred meters in length, and stepping inside the habitat-styled interior, visitors could have direct encounters with many Japanese chipmunks.

chipmunks leaping nimbly through the treetops, chipmunks napping on beech branches, chipmunks burying walnuts in the ground, chipmunks stuffing their cheeks full of sunflower seeds until they looked like okamedai masks...

Their adorableness was like animated stuffed animals.

Then a young Japanese chipmunk scurried along the ground and leaped onto Tenchi's shoulder.

It rubbed its cheek against Tenchi's cheek, as if greeting a friend.

"Cute!"

"Cute!"

Tenchi and Sakuya cried out at exactly the same moment.

Their voices overlapped.

As if the two had become one, their voices meshed with miraculous precision, creating a perfect unison.

And in that moment — Sakuya had a flash of inspiration.

(— That's it! That's the one!
I've finally found it — a "common topic"!
chipmunks. chipmunks.
With a chipmunk between us, I can become one with Masaki-kun.
I can stand on the same ground as him, think about the same things.Just like right now...!)

"Masaki-kun, let's keep a chipmunk!"

A defining trait of Sakuya's was the extremely short time lag between decision and action.

The moment the Japanese chipmunk leaped off Tenchi's shoulder, she rattled off at full speed:

"Go on, keep one, a chipmunk. Aren't they unbelievably cute? Like little stuffed animals. No, way cuter than any stuffed animal. Having one of those at home would be the best. Besides, Masaki-kun, you live alone and it must get lonely. It's perfect. Come on, let's get one, let's get one."

"Yeah... but..."

Tenchi answered Sakuya's momentum hesitatingly but with a serious face:

"I don't really like pets."

"Why not!?"

"I don't like the idea of buying and selling lives with money. And I don't have confidence I could take care of one properly."

"I'll help take care of it."

"And I don't have money for a pet in the first place. My allowance from Dad barely covers living expenses."

"I can contribute a little. Come on, so —"

Tenchi shook his head and cut Sakuya's words short.

"I'll pass. I don't feel like it."

"If you don't feel like it, there's nothing I can do, but..."

Sakuya murmured in disappointment.

"It seemed like such a good idea..."

However, thirty minutes later, Tenchi would end up taking a chipmunk home with a dazed expression like someone who had watched a horse molt into a cow.

Because —

"Come and get 'em, come and geeeet 'em! Cute cute chipmunk-ish thing right here! Gets tame real fast, eats anything, won't get any bigger than this! Come and get 'em, come and geeeet 'em!"

Near a deserted part of the woods at the edge of the park, a woman was selling a chipmunk in a cage, hawking it like a stall vendor selling chicks at a festival. Sakuya spotted her immediately.

Tenchi recognized the woman calling out her cheerful sales pitch in work overalls without a care in the world.

Bright red hair. Steel-blue button eyes that held both madness and innocence. A childlike figure where bust, waist, and hips were all roughly the same measurement...

"G-good grief... it's Washu-san!"

Yes, it was Washu.

One of the women who, until a month ago, had lived under the same roof as Tenchi.

A belated introduction: at the Masaki family home in Okayama, six women and one cosmic creature lived as housemates. Ryoko, Ayeka, Sasami, Mihoshi, Kiyone, Washu, and Ryo-ohki.

Setting aside introductions of anyone other than Washu for now, Washu was a self-proclaimed greatest genius scientist in the universe, who devoted herself night and day to dubious inventions and brought calamity after calamity down on the household.

"Oh my, isn't that Tenchi-dono? What a coincidence, running into you here."

Washu gave the thunderstruck Tenchi a carefree smile.

"Do you know her, Masaki-kun!?"

"Um, sort of."

Brushing past his explanation to Sakuya, Tenchi bore down on Washu in a rush.

"What are you doing here, Washu-san!? What on earth are you in Tokyo for!?"

"Well, I wanted to buy parts for the anti-proton bomb I'm currently working on from Akihabara. But — what a surprise — it turns out I can't buy them. They're not expensive parts, but now I realize I'm completely broke."

"So you started an impromptu pet shop to make money?"

"Started one," Washu nodded. "Though I haven't sold anything yet."

"Of course not. In a deserted place like this, there's no way customers will show up."

"Ah, I see," Washu clapped her hands. "That does make sense. No wonder there's no one around. I just assumed nuclear war had wiped out all of humanity."

"Well, at least the little one was lucky not to be bought by someone weird..."

Tenchi gazed sympathetically at the chipmunk innocently spinning on the wheel inside its small cage.

"But this is strange... I thought chipmunks only live in Hokkaido in Japan, and you can't catch them near where we live in Okayama..."

"Sharp observation!" Washu applauded. "As expected of Tenchi-dono. You're right. Actually, this little one is a synthetic organism I created."

"A synthetic organism!?"

"Yes. It looks and behaves exactly like a chipmunk, but it was actually born by accident during a gene recombination experiment — an unknown life form."

"I thought something like that..."

When Tenchi shrugged in dismay, the "weird person" he'd been referring to cut into the conversation.

"I don't totally understand this," Sakuya said to Washu, "but basically, it's fine to think of this as a chipmunk, right?"

"More or less. There are three differences from a regular chipmunk."

"Food and care requirements?"

"Exactly the same as a chipmunk."

"Price?"

"Three hundred eighty yen, tax included."

"I'LL TAKE IT!!!"

Screaming at the top of her voice so it echoed through the woodland, Sakuya snatched the cage with the chipmunk from Washu at machine-gun speed before Tenchi could stop her, trading her coins for it.

Then she forced the cage into Tenchi's hands and said:

"Here, Masaki-kun, a gift from me. Love it as if it were me."

"K-Kamishiro-san!?"

"Ohhh, I see, so that's how it is. Oh my, isn't that sweet, quite the passionate display."

"The two of them — and the chipmunk," Sakuya concluded as Washu nodded knowingly, before Tenchi could get a word in edgewise.

"This little one is now out of its lonely single life. Aren't you glad."

"W-wait, hang on, both of you —"

"And you were worried earlier, weren't you, about it being bought by some weird person? Going to live with you, this little one will be happier than it could be with anyone else."

"As its creator, I'm relieved if Tenchi-dono will be its owner. After all, you have the track record of taming six wild mares. Oh, and I'll send a proper large cage and full care kit through the dimensional tunnel when I get back to Okayama. Don't worry about it, it's on me!"

"No, wait, I —"

"It really is adorable, isn't it. What shall we name it?"

"Since it was created by me, Washu-chan herself, it might be more fun to raise than a regular chipmunk."

"Oh, really!?"

"Yes. You'll see some interesting things before long."

"Oh my, I can't wait!"

"I —"

"Do your best raising it, Masaki-kun!"

"I'm counting on you, Tenchi-dono!"

"I —"

The carpet-bombing of language from Sakuya and Washu carried an irresistible force.

Tenchi's spirit was far too frail to go head-on against it.

Tenchi raised the white flag of surrender without a fight.

Having conceded defeat, Tenchi had no choice but to say:

"...All right."

And so Tenchi became the owner of a chipmunk.

Sakuya, having secured the longed-for "common topic," walked home with a grin of triumph plastered across her face.

Everything seemed to have gone exactly as Sakuya had planned.

But... good fortune often comes with hidden obstacles.

The situation would soon take on a strange character.

If what Tenchi had brought home were a proper chipmunk, there would have been no problem at all.

But it wasn't a chipmunk — it was a chipmunk-like creature, born from the twisted experiments of the mad scientist Washu...

The next day at Tenmangu High, Tenchi and Sakuya's conversation was dominated, for the most part, by the subject of the chipmunk.

"How was it after I left? With the little chipmunk?" Sakuya asked Tenchi, who sat across from her in the school cafeteria, while eating the curry rice — the only dish that actually tasted like food.

"Yeah," Tenchi answered while chewing something that could generously be called a breaded cutlet.

"It warmed up to me more quickly than I expected. At first it was a little scared, but when Washu-san sent the larger cage and nest box through the tunnel, it settled right in and went straight to sleep."

"Oh, really."

"And then around five in the morning, a strange sound woke me up, and it was his doing. He was up early, going back and forth on the perch — back and forth, back and forth. So I've been sleep-deprived. I've been so drowsy in class."

As he said this, Tenchi didn't look particularly displeased.

"Is it a boy or a girl, I wonder?"

"I think it's a boy. Something cute was dangling from him."

"Dangling cutely, hmm. Hehehe..."

"What's funny?"

"Because it's the first time you've talked about something... risqué, Masaki-kun."

"It's an animal."

"I know, but hehehe."

Sakuya smiled cutely, peering up into Tenchi's face with upturned eyes, and asked in a casual tone:

"Can I come see the little chipmunk after school?"

"Sure. Of course."

Tenchi answered immediately with a smile.

Sakuya grinned inwardly with satisfaction.

Because Tenchi, who previously had shown strong reluctance about Sakuya coming to his room, had accepted her visit so easily and naturally.

(— Mission success!
From now on, I can come and go freely at Masaki-kun's place.
What a marvel, the chipmunk god…)

The Japanese chipmunk — class Mammalia, order Rodentia, family Sciuridae, genus Eutamias, species Eutamias sibiricus.

Thirteen centimeters body length, twelve centimeters tail length, one hundred and seven grams.

The fur on its belly was pure white; everywhere else was light brown.

Five dark brown vertical stripes ran down its back.

Its jet-black obsidian-like round eyes and its bushy tail, expressively swaying, gave it the charm of a mischievous forest sprite...

Sakuya sat on the hardwood floor with her school uniform miniskirt tucked under her, gazing at the chipmunk — her "common topic" and Tenchi's new roommate.

Tenchi sat beside her, peering into the cage alongside Sakuya.

— We look like a couple admiring the sleeping face of a child...

Tenchi's room: a mid-sized one-room apartment in a back street less than ten minutes' walk from Tenmangu High.

The chipmunk, watched over by their warm gazes, was contentedly eating walnuts.

Filled with a rising sense of happiness, Sakuya smiled and said to Tenchi:

"Have you named it yet?"

"No." Tenchi replied. "I can't think of a good one."

"Then let's think of one together."

"Okay."

— This is great, this is great.

Thinking of names for a child together — we're just like a married couple...

"For these kinds of things," Sakuya said, "having some kind of criteria makes it easier. Fruits, movie titles, the names of your favorite musicians... for example, what are your favorite things, Masaki-kun?"

"My favorite things..." Tenchi folded his arms and thought. "Let me see. Mountains, the sky, the sound of a stream... pork cutlets, yam, peaches... soccer, jeans... rainbows... imoyokan sweet potato yokan from Funawa... shrines... Okayama. Oh, how about 'Okayama'?"

"O... Okayama!?"

Sakuya cried out in bewilderment.

"Then Imoyokan. Or Tonkatsu... no, Tonkatsu is kind of weird, I suppose."

— Okayama and Imoyokan are both pretty weird too.

"Hmm, it's hard to choose. Both Okayama and Imoyokan have their charm."

"Okayama is better, don't you think!?"

Sakuya said hurriedly, her cheek twitching.

"Okayama it is. Compared to Imoyokan, it's still... no wait, that's not what I mean... actually, when you think about it, Okayama has an amazing ring to it! I could probably learn to love it if I tried! It suits this little one perfectly, Okayama!"

"If Kamishiro-san says so."

Tenchi looked at the chipmunk with fondness.

"Your name is officially Okayama. Are you happy, Okayama!?"

The unfortunate chipmunk thus named, bearing no grudge against those who named it, innocently played with the finger Tenchi offered.

Sakuya wiped the sweat from her brow with a complicated expression somewhere between tears and laughter.

(— I didn't know this.
Masaki-kun has an incredibly odd sense of naming.
I ended up saying those things to avoid making the atmosphere awkward, but if we ever actually had a child, I should probably be the one naming it.
But at least I learned one of Masaki-kun's deep secrets, so this little one is still worth it…)

Just then, Okayama suddenly pressed his tiny hands together in a praying pose and began busily rubbing his palms against his snout.

"Oh! Okayama is praying!" Sakuya exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha." Tenchi laughed and explained. "That's called 'the chipmunk's prayer.' It's a common behavior after eating."

"What is it doing?"

"Probably cleaning its mouth, nose, and paws all at once. According to Ainu legend, it's said to be an omen of misfortune before a bad event."

"An omen of misfortune..."

"Yes. They say that if you saw 'the chipmunk's prayer' in the morning, you'd cancel the hunt for that day. Well, Kamishiro-san doesn't believe in legends, so this is probably hilarious to you."

"When someone says it straight to my face, it's a little irritating..."

Sakuya muttered under her breath, then looked at Tenchi curiously.

"Still... you know a lot about chipmunks, Masaki-kun."

"Hehehe."

Tenchi laughed bashfully and pulled about ten books from the bookshelf.

They were all care books about chipmunks and small animals in general.

"I went around every bookshop in Shibuya buying them all up after that. I had zero knowledge about chipmunks, after all."

"You read all of these in one night." Sakuya said, half amazed, half impressed.

"No wonder you're drowsy at school."

"I get pretty obsessive when I get into something. Once I'm hooked, I'm relentless about it." Tenchi said, half joking, half serious.

"But since I've taken responsibility for a life, I figured I should have at least minimal knowledge. Now I'm a bit of a chipmunk expert."

"Then, professor, question: what do chipmunks eat!?"

"Oh, what a good question. You think chipmunks just eat acorns and walnuts, right? But actually they're omnivores. Their main diet is nuts and pine cones, but they'll eat tree buds, fruits, insects, snails, even the eggs of small birds. Of course, in the city where you raise them, you can't get those things, so the main diet is commercially available chipmunk pellets..."

Over bancha tea and Pringles, Tenchi's chipmunk lecture continued in a long, winding stream thereafter.

Care methods, how to build a relationship, taxonomic position, ecology in the wild, the meaning of distinctive behaviors...

Sakuya enjoyed it, offering responses and occasionally breaking in with well-timed questions.

The lecture sometimes became too specialized and strayed outside her range of interest.

But she could see clearly how much Tenchi cared for Okayama with his whole heart, and that was somehow pleasing to her.

At the same time, this was the first time she had seen Tenchi this talkative.

It was hard to believe he was the same tongue-tied boy who had returned barely one or two words to her careful conversational gambits.

Tenchi talked passionately and without hesitation.

It was filled with a kind of elevated happiness that made even the listener smile involuntarily.

"Sorry, sorry. I was the only one talking," Tenchi said, bringing the chipmunk lecture to an end when the minute hand of the clock had made one and a half revolutions.

"No... it was a lot of fun."

(— I want to keep listening. I want to spend one more minute, one more second of this modest but full and happy time with Masaki-kun…) In a languid, dreamy afterglow like waking from a sweet afternoon nap, Sakuya thought that sincerely.

"...Good thing you got Okayama, isn't it."

"Yeah."

"The Okayama Effect."

"Huh!?"

"Never mind. Hehehe."

Sakuya laughed bashfully.

Without noticing, the room had been bathed in evening darkness.

Through the window, the western sky was dyed in the colors of the setting sun, and against a backdrop of orange-burning clouds, large and small buildings rose up in black silhouette.

When Tenchi pulled the cord of the ceiling fluorescent light, the darkness was instantly swept away.

The dreamlike hour was over.

"It got pretty late. Want to go eat dinner somewhere?"

"No." Sakuya quietly shook her head. "I'll just go home now. I feel full — both in my heart and in my stomach."

"I see. Then, would you come again tomorrow if it's not too much trouble?"

"It's not too much trouble at all..."

Sakuya felt a sweet-sour joy welling up inside her chest.

"First time... you've invited me yourself, Masaki-kun."

"Oh, was it? Ahaha." Tenchi scratched his hair shyly.

Sakuya jumped to her feet and said:

"Bye-bye, Okayama. See you tomorrow!"

— bidding goodbye to Okayama, she ran lightly toward the front door, the hem of her miniskirt swirling.

Then, just before closing the front door, she turned back and said:

"See you... Tenchi-kun."

"Yeah, see you. Thanks for today, really."

Tenchi's smile disappeared behind the closing door.

Sakuya stood for a moment in front of the door.

Her cheeks had flushed the faintest shade of pink.

(— I said it for the first time.

I called Masaki-kun by his first name for the first time.)

"Tenchi-kun."

(Masaki-kun didn't seem displeased at all.

He accepted it naturally, said "thank you."

I can call him "Tenchi-kun" from now on.

We've become just a little more intimate…)

"Tenchi-kun..."

Sakuya murmured the name softly, then placed her right hand gently over her quietly beating heart.

## The Okayama Effect

What Sakuya called "the Okayama Effect" went on to produce a spectacular record.

Just as she'd predicted, Sakuya gained free and open access to Tenchi's apartment, and exercised that privilege to the fullest — knocking on Tenchi's door almost every day.

Far from finding it unwelcome, Tenchi seemed to eagerly look forward to it.

In his own room, Tenchi talked with remarkable fluency.

The topic was primarily the small new housemate, but since Sakuya found Okayama adorable in her own right, sitting in on chipmunk talk wasn't a hardship.

Rather, she found straightforward joy in standing on the same ground as Tenchi, seeing the same things, sharing the same values.

(— And with Okayama between us, conversation flows naturally, if I dote on it Tenchi-kun is pleased, and my stock rises too…)

That calculation was also in the back of Sakuya's mind.

And Tenchi fell for that calculation with satisfying ease.

In less than a week, the wall-like thing that had obstructed the exchange of their hearts had grown gradually thinner, like deep snow melting in spring sunshine.

The formless awkwardness and strange carefulness completely disappeared, and their relationship became entirely natural.

Sometimes Tenchi even made jokes (most of them not funny, admittedly) to tease Sakuya.

Of course, Sakuya's address of "Tenchi-kun" was now fully recognized as an established fact.

Whatever one called a "deep relationship," at least their relationship was steadily transforming into the form Sakuya wished for.

Along with this, Sakuya began to notice a certain change taking place within herself.

Between chipmunk talks, Tenchi often voiced his admiration for nature.

He spoke with passion about the beauty of the blue sky, the fun of clouds, the fragrance of the forest, the freshness of the early summer wind off a lake surface, the glamour of a mountain's blazing autumn leaves, the blessing of a warm kotatsu blanket you slip into while watching the blizzard through the window.

Hearing these things, Sakuya had gradually begun to take an interest in the sunset sky peeking through gaps between buildings, in weeds sprouting up through cracks in the asphalt pavement.

The quintessential Shibuya schoolgirl Sakuya had a refreshingly clear-cut personality, but in the same way she lacked depth of feeling and subtle emotional nuance.

That same Sakuya, influenced by Tenchi, had awakened to a new joy — appreciating nature and the changing of the seasons.

(— I'm definitely changing.

It surprises even myself.

I never knew the sky, the clouds, the smell of the wind could be this enjoyable.

This is amazing.

Being changed by the influence of my boyfriend — it's so moving.

Ah, the "deep relationship" I've dreamed of... just one more step…)

But it wasn't all good.

Tenchi devoted his entire soul to loving and cherishing Okayama.

He diligently cared for it, kept a pet diary, took endless photographs, frequented the library to read specialized books — in short, he became a deeply knowledgeable chipmunk expert in a very short time.

Of course, that itself was not a bad thing.

But whether from the loneliness of living alone, the sense of responsibility for having taken charge of a life, or his born gentleness and obsessive personality, Tenchi's absorption in Okayama was slightly beyond the pale.

Okayama ate from his hand for the first time!

Toilet training successful!

It sneezed and got snot on its face!

It came out of the cage to play!

It sat on his palm!

It had diarrhea!

He would be elated or in despair over each of these things, displaying the doting of a classic pet parent and repeatedly earning exasperated laughs from Amagasaki and Tsuchida.

Moreover, a poem Tenchi wrote for a short Japanese test at school was of the following nature:

Oh, Okayama
Innocent forest sprite
Crystal of transparent joy sent by God
I never tire of watching you
Your jet-black eyes remind me of the night sky over my hometown
Your artless gestures
Are like the peaceful clouds drifting through the sky of my hometown
And your sleeping face
Is the peace of my hometown

Frankly, it was ludicrous.

Even the patient Sakuya seemed to have difficulty following Tenchi into the manic world he had entered.

On days when Sakuya went to a hair salon after school and didn't visit Tenchi's room, when she arrived at school the next morning and had barely set her bag on her desk, Tenchi would be waiting and burst into speech like a dam breaking.

"You know, Okayama opened a walnut by himself for the first time yesterday."

"Wow, that's amazing!"

Sakuya expressed exaggerated admiration. It pleased Tenchi more.

"It's proof he's grown up. I'm so happy!"

"Me too!"

"You're happy for me, Kamishiro-san!"

"Of course I am!"

"All right, today we're having a party at my place!"

"Congratulations, Tenchi-kun!"

"Thank you, Kamishiro-san!"

(— What a ridiculous conversation,) Sakuya thought.

(But Tenchi grabbing my hand in front of the whole class and saying "thank you" — he never would have done that before. That's deep, in a way... is it deep? Well…)

"Welcome home."

"I'm back. You finished early today."

"Yeah. Counting the offerings went faster than I thought."

"Good work. You must be hungry."

"I'm so hungry I could pass out."

"I'll get it ready right away then."

That kind of exchange, like a scene from a newlywed household, soon became what could be heard late at night in Tenchi's room.

A conversation between Tenchi, who had finished his night training every three days at Tsuchida Tenmangu Shrine, and Sakuya, who had secured her position as live-in girlfriend.

Truly the pinnacle of "the Okayama Effect."

By the way, Tenchi had not come to Tokyo without purpose.

The Masaki family had served as Shinto priests for generations in Okayama, and Tenchi was destined to take over the household someday.

For that reason, following the recommendation of Tsuchida Dokuren — a friend of grandfather Katsuhito, the head priest of Tsuchida Tenmangu in Shibuya (also Tenchi's friend Tsuchida's grandfather and the chairman of Tenmangu High) — Tenchi had come to Tokyo to train.

In any case, after finishing his night training, Tenchi came home, plunked himself down in front of the cage, and spoke to Okayama with an expression of infinite tenderness.

"I'm home, Okayama... Were you all right? Didn't give Kamishiro-san any trouble?"

Meanwhile, Sakuya put on her apron and headed to the kitchen to prepare dinner.

"Prepare" was perhaps too generous a term for what she could actually do — picking up ready-made rice and side dishes from the convenience store and microwaving them, pouring hot water into instant miso soup.

If she were to express her love for Tenchi through dinner, it meant visiting different stores for each dish in search of the best taste: gyoza from Lawson, salad from Seven-Eleven, omelets from FamilyMart.

Even so, the warm atmosphere created by Tenchi, Sakuya, and Okayama in that small studio apartment — if you replaced Okayama with a human baby — was almost identical to that of a happy young married couple.

It had already been two weeks since Okayama became Tenchi's pet.

Sakuya looked at Tenchi, who had taken Okayama out of the cage and was stroking the little creature's back with a finger in a cherishing way, and thought with deep feeling:

(— I'm happy. Genuinely unbelievably happy. I don't think there's anyone else in class with this kind of atmosphere with their boyfriend. It's all thanks to Okayama.
As a thank-you, maybe I'll bring its favorite American cherries tomorrow…)

But at the same time, Sakuya was also thinking:

(— Lucky Okayama.Being treasured so much by Tenchi-kun.
Being jealous of a pet is super uncool, but... I'm still just a tiny bit envious.
If I were a chipmunk, I could be cherished by Tenchi-kun like that…)

Just then, Okayama abruptly began performing the "chipmunk's prayer" busily.

"...An omen of misfortune, huh." Sakuya murmured the words casually.

In the next instant, her eyes flew wide open in shock.

"That can't... how can this be...!?"

A stunned murmur fell from her lips.

Sakuya had realized something cruel.

The gaze Tenchi had once directed at her was now directed at Okayama.

Okayama was monopolizing all of Tenchi's gentleness, all his attentiveness, all his love.

Sakuya and Tenchi had not actually become "deep" at all.

The one who had formed a "deep relationship" with Tenchi was Okayama.

The one who had been chosen as Tenchi's lover was Okayama.

And at that moment, both Sakuya and even Tenchi had forgotten that Okayama was actually a synthetic organism created by Washu...

A Flash. The incident happened abruptly. On the sixteenth night since Tenchi had begun living together with Okayama, in front of both Tenchi and Sakuya, Okayama suddenly emitted a blinding flash of light from its entire body.

"Whoaaa!"

"Eeek!"

Tenchi and Sakuya screamed and covered their eyes from the glare.

Then, from Okayama's back — still frozen in the "chipmunk's prayer" pose on the desk — something emerged.

To be precise, from inside, as if unzipping a costume, something pulled the zipper on Okayama's back down from the inside and stood up — just like the actor inside a Godzilla suit standing up to reveal himself.

"A z-zipper!?"

Tenchi nearly slipped for a moment, but Sakuya clung to Tenchi's arm, her lips trembling.

The Okayama skin that had crumpled onto the desk underwent molecular disintegration, scattering as countless particles of light into the air.

What remained was — a girl.

A tiny, tiny girl, about fifteen centimeters tall.

"T-Tenchi-kun, wh-what is that...!"

"K-Kamishiro-san, wh-what is that...!"

Both of them stared at the girl in simultaneous shock, pointing.

The girl slowly lifted her face and gazed steadily at Tenchi and Sakuya.

Large, adorable jet-black eyes — just like a chipmunk's — wavered slightly, seeming to want to say something.

"O-Okayama... is that you, Okayama?"

Tenchi ventured to speak.

The girl smiled warmly and nodded emphatically.

"You understand what I'm saying!?"

The girl nodded again.

"I see... so that's what it was."

Unlike Sakuya, whose face had locked up in petrified terror, Tenchi seemed to have already regained his composure.

Having once lived with six extraterrestrial women, he must have developed an immunity to supernatural phenomena.

"I'd completely forgotten, but you were never just an ordinary chipmunk, were you. If that's the case, it's not strange that you'd shed your old form when you grew."

"What do you mean, Tenchi-kun?" Sakuya asked in a small voice.

"Remember what Washu-san said? That the pet looks like a chipmunk but it was born from a gene recombination experiment as an unknown life form?"

"She did say something like that, I think..."

"So it shed its form and became a girl."

"That's not really an explanation."

"Ha ha ha." Tenchi laughed. "Washu-san is the type to pull pranks like this. Oh, and she did say something. 'There are three ways she differs from a regular chipmunk, and you'll see something interesting before long.' So this shedding was the first of those. That solves all the mysteries."

"It doesn't solve anything."

"I thought it was a boy because of... you know... but to become a girl — hmm, life is mysterious indeed."

Tenchi folded his arms in admiration, and Sakuya stared at him in exasperation, before suddenly jumping up and exclaiming:

"That's it — we need to call the police!"

"The p-police!?"

Alarm flashed across Tenchi's face.

"W-wait, Kamishiro-san, we can't call the police!"

"Or maybe the Self-Defense Force — who handles cases like this?"

Tenchi hurriedly snatched the phone receiver from Sakuya's hand.

"That's not the issue — if it came out that a girl emerged from a chipmunk, there'd be a huge uproar!"

"There's already a huge uproar. That's why I'm calling the police."

"B-but if the police investigate it could lead back to the extraterrestrials at home — no wait, that's not it, I mean, various... complicated things would—"

"Stop talking nonsense and give me the phone!"

Sakuya's response was perfectly natural for a member of the general public who had just witnessed an irrational supernatural event.

Tenchi fell into troubled silence.

But then, taking a deep breath, Tenchi placed his hands firmly on Sakuya's shoulders and began speaking in a solemn tone.

"Kamishiro-san... this world is filled with countless mysteries and wonders."

"W-what's gotten into you, Tenchi-kun, all of a sudden...?"

Ignoring the bewildered Sakuya, Tenchi spoke fluently, like water flowing over smooth stones.

"Why is the earth round? Why does the sun rise in the east and set in the west? Why do men and women love each other and hurt each other?... Humanity has faced these countless questions head-on, and has solved them one by one with wisdom, courage, and reason. So we too must not avert our eyes from reality! Nothing comes from

running away! Kamishiro-san... let's accept it. Let's accept that Okayama has become a girl. And from acceptance, let's create something new together!"

"...Understood, Tenchi-kun. I'll try."

Sakuya pressed her lips together tightly and nodded with a serious expression.

Tenchi trying to persuade Sakuya with completely baffling logic was something, but Sakuya actually accepting it was equally something.

In any case, Okayama in girl form was thus granted permission to continue her current living situation.

"—So it's all right now, Okayama," Tenchi said.

Hearing his words, a smile returned to Okayama's face, which had been frozen in anxious stillness.

Sakuya, finally catching her breath, looked at the girl version of Okayama once again.

Apart from her height and the chipmunk tail growing from her behind, her appearance was indistinguishable from a middle-school-aged human girl.

Her longer straight hair gleamed gold, and the young sensuality emanating from her small frame — dressed only in a chipmunk-patterned bralette and shorts — was enough to make a lolicon weep with joy.

"Would you like some tea, Okayama!?"

When Tenchi offered tea poured into a mayonnaise lid, Okayama leaped onto his shoulder with chipmunk-like agility and began sipping with tiny gulps.

"Now that she looks like this, I can't exactly put her to sleep in the nest box. I'll have to do something..."

Sensitive to his monologue, Okayama shook her head rapidly.

"Are you saying this is fine? What an undemanding creature."

Tenchi stroked Okayama's cheek with his pinky finger in a way that said he couldn't help but adore her.

But Sakuya watched Okayama squirm ticklishly with a glare unlike anything she had shown before...

Wrapped in a pure white handkerchief, Okayama soon began breathing softly in sleep.

Waiting eagerly for Okayama to fall asleep, Sakuya asked Tenchi with a grave expression:

"What are you going to do about this, Tenchi-kun? Going forward?"

"Tomorrow I'll go to a toy shop," Tenchi replied, "and buy a Rika-chan doll bed and bedding. Even if it's a sympathy handkerchief from a funeral, that's too pitiful."

"That's not what I mean." Sakuya said impatiently. "I said what I did earlier somewhat on impulse, but having cooled my head and thought it over properly, I still think it's unnatural for Okayama to be here."

"You want me to abandon her!?" Tenchi exclaimed in shock. "There's no way I could do that!"

"I don't mean abandon her, but couldn't you have that Washu-san person take her back?"

"Why?"

"Why... because..."

Sakuya faltered at Tenchi's direct, simple question.

Tenchi continued in a somewhat agitated tone:

"That's what I think is wrong with city people. Saying they're bored of it, or that it's grown too big to care for — abandoning pets, pushing them off on other people... that's irresponsible. You can't treat life like an object."

"I know that, but..."

"And it was you who suggested keeping Okayama, Kamishiro-san. You're the one who persuaded me to take her."

Tenchi's words hit every mark.

Sakuya could only bow her head and fall silent.

But inside her heart, dark and painful emotions were swirling violently.

(— Yes, it's true that I suggested keeping her.
But I suggested a chipmunk. I never said keep a girl.
I never imagined this would happen. Look at how Okayama looks.
No matter how you see it, she's completely a human girl.
It's not right for Tenchi-kun to live with a girl other than me.
I was already pretty down yesterday when I realized that Okayama had stolen Tenchi-kun from me.

If she were just a chipmunk, I'd endure it.
Being jealous of a pet would just be embarrassing.
But now, things are completely different.
Even if to Tenchi-kun she's still a pet, the Okayama of right now is a human girl.
I invited my boyfriend to live with another girl — I'm the laughingstock of all clowns.

That's... lonely. That's painful.Tenchi-kun, please notice my feelings.
Please, please notice…)

After that, dark and gloomy days continued for Sakuya.

She still went straight to Tenchi's room after school as usual, but her purpose was clearly different from before.

It was to monitor the relationship between Tenchi and Okayama.

Of course, she couldn't believe Tenchi would ever make a mistake with Okayama, and what actually met her eyes was not greatly changed from before Okayama became a girl.

Tenchi never treated Okayama as a young woman to be cherished, and Okayama too seemed to stay within her role as a pet — fawning on Tenchi and playing with him.

Moreover, since Okayama understood human language but didn't speak herself, this impression was all the stronger.

Only, it was true that Tenchi's gaze on Okayama had grown gentler, and he tended to her more attentively than before.

But even that could be explained if you considered that, with Okayama having taken on human form, Tenchi felt an even stronger sense of responsibility and mission to protect life.

Day by day all was well —

Yet still Sakuya couldn't help watching over Tenchi and Okayama.

And the grave darkness that had fallen over her expression deepened a little more with each passing day.

Even understanding it in her head, she couldn't help feeling a pained longing and unresolvable feeling at the thought of Tenchi living cheerfully with a being that had the appearance of a human woman.

Every time she saw Okayama's innocent sleeping face in the doll-sized bed, Sakuya tried to force herself to think, "This child is not to blame."

Just as Tenchi said, it was Sakuya herself who had maneuvered Tenchi into keeping Okayama.

In that sense, the greater part of the responsibility for the current situation lay with Sakuya herself.

(— But if I'd known Okayama would become a girl, I never would have given her as a gift.I just wish Tenchi-kun would direct half the gaze he gives that child toward me.
If he'd pour half the love he pours on that child onto me.
If he'd fall for me the way he fell for that child…)

"Okayama, don't eat it all by yourself. You have to share with Kamishiro-san."

Sakuya looked up at Tenchi's voice.

Okayama dashed nimbly across the floor, used the table as a stepping stone, and leaped onto Sakuya's shoulder.

In her hands were the vivid crimson American cherries Sakuya had brought as a gift.

"Now, say thank you, Okayama."

Okayama bowed her head with a little nod.

"Good girl."

Tenchi nodded with satisfaction, and Sakuya returned a strained smile.

Then, reluctantly, she accepted the American cherry Okayama held out and put it in her mouth.

One morning Tenchi was waiting at the school gate, and as he walked alongside Sakuya toward the classroom, his eyes sparkled as he talked excitedly:

"When I woke up this morning, I was absolutely shocked! Okayama has wings growing from her back! They're just like the fairies in manga, and they're so cute. And on top of that, Okayama has an amazing talent — she can cook! Oh, I want to go home so badly. I can't wait for after school, Kamishiro-san."

When Sakuya arrived at Tenchi's room after school, dragged along by him, Okayama had indeed transformed into a fairy-like being.

She was hovering with four thin dragonfly-like wings, stirring curry in a pot with a ladle.

"Well, this is something..." Sakuya murmured vaguely.

"Amazing, right?" Tenchi said. "This is probably the second of the three differences from a chipmunk that Washu-san mentioned."

Okayama turned around and smiled openly at Sakuya.

Sakuya smiled back ambiguously.

Annoyingly, the curry rice Okayama made was quite good.

The vegetable salad was elegantly arranged in a glass bowl, and the dessert apple had been carved into rabbit shapes using a cutter blade.

Sakuya ate Okayama's home cooking in silence.

She felt the loneliness of a single woman who had crashed a newlywed's dinner for a free meal.

Conversation naturally became sporadic, and in the stillness, the sound of spoons and plates clinking echoed oddly loud.

Sensing the awkward atmosphere, Tenchi spoke loudly in feigned cheerfulness:

"This curry rice is superb!"

Immediately, Sakuya responded with a pointedly cutting tone:

"It is. Maybe I should have Okayama teach me to cook."

For an instant, the air in the room froze.

Tenchi and Okayama stopped eating and stared blankly at Sakuya.

Sakuya maintained a calm facade as she brought the curry to her lips, but inside she was a mess of regret and humiliation.

(— I'm such a horrible person. Such a horrible person…)

A few minutes later, Sakuya had turned cheerful as if a different person had taken over, and the somewhat early dinner ended in a warm atmosphere.

But behind her forced smile, Sakuya's heart had grown as cold and deadened as a crumbling ancient temple...

The first Saturday of June: On a morning of soft, warm drizzle falling silently, Sakuya

brought along a somewhat reluctant Tenchi and headed somewhere in Chiba Prefecture.

To repair the darkening clouds over her relationship with Tenchi, she planned to enjoy a long-overdue two-person date at the largest seaside amusement park in Japan.

But Tenchi showed little interest in the childlike rides, in the unpleasant large black mouse man strutting arrogantly through the park, in the extravagantly priced souvenirs, or in the parade.

The standard date itinerary, the standard cheers and screams, the standard shopping...

The clock ticked meaninglessly by, and Sakuya's rare outing alone with Tenchi came to an unfruitful end.

The only gain was that they had quite naturally shared an umbrella.

"Should we head back? I don't want Okayama to get lonely."

Tenchi said, glancing at his watch.

Sakuya nodded in silence.

On the subway back, the two barely exchanged a word.

She occasionally sensed Tenchi's troubled glance, but Sakuya stared straight ahead at the window, hanging silently from the strap.

Just past six in the evening, Tenchi and Sakuya stepped out at the Hachiko Square in front of Shibuya Station, sharing their umbrella.

The nighttime streets of Shibuya were shrouded in a veil of fine rain, and through that veil, mercury lamps, traffic signals, and the glittering illuminations of buildings wavered mistily.

Sakuya watched the countless umbrellas passing before her in a daze, and said to Tenchi in a flat voice:

"Today was fun."

"For me too."

(— That's a lie. Tenchi-kun, you liar..)

"Hey, won't you come by my place?"

"I'm tired today. I'll just go home."

"I see... Okayama will be disappointed. She always looks forward to you coming."

"That's a lie."

Sakuya murmured softly.

"Hm!?"

Tenchi looked at her questioningly, then said anxiously with a furrowed brow:

"Is something wrong, Kamishiro-san? For the past four or five days, something seems off."

"Nothing's wrong," Sakuya answered in a hoarse voice.

"Are you sure... but your color looks a little pale."

"Nothing's wrong."

"I feel like you're not quite yourself somehow. Maybe you should go to the doctor next week—"

"I said nothing's wrong!"

Sakuya shouted as if throwing the words.

Then she gave the stunned Tenchi an awkward smile and said:

"See you tomorrow,"

in a trembling voice, then plunged herself into the crowd.

Breaking through the crowds and reaching the back streets, Sakuya suddenly broke into a run.

She ran as hard as she could, without an umbrella.

The cold drizzle clung and beat against her body.

Puddles erupted in splashes under her feet.

Her wet bangs plastered against her forehead, as if to hide the pained expression on her face.

"Why... why did it end up like this!"

Fighting desperately against the urge to cry, Sakuya ran on toward home...

Rain-Soaked Woods.The sky had cleared to a deep blue. Torn clouds raced across it as if being chased.

In the strong sunshine that felt like the height of summer, a calm lingered in the woods like a respite between rainy season days, and on the ground below, patches of sunlight gleamed white, scattered like broken mirror fragments.

Sakuya sat at the base of a great oak, her eyes drifting emptily ahead.

In the direction of her gaze, beyond the trunks of the trees, Tenchi's figure appeared and disappeared, playing tag with Okayama flying through the air.

Tenchi and Okayama's radiant smiles flashed behind the broadleaf trunks, appearing and disappearing.

(— What am I doing…)

She thought in a fog of hazy, weary consciousness.

(It had been Tenchi's idea.)

"Sorry about yesterday. Even though you took me somewhere nice, I just couldn't seem to get into it. So to make up for it — no, not really to make up for it, but the weather's nice — what do you say we go to Inokashira Park, the three of us? Okayama says she'll make us a bento."

Sakuya had no active reason to refuse such a phone call from Tenchi.

She had arrived at Inokashira Park with Tenchi carrying Okayama in his pocket and a daypack full of sandwiches, just past eleven in the morning.

The first place the two went was the brilliantly red temple inside the park dedicated to Benten.

It was Sakuya's first time visiting this place.

While Tenchi watched curiously, Sakuya tossed a coin into the offering box, pressed her hands together like "the chipmunk's prayer," and offered a prayer to the enshrined Benzaiten.

She didn't know what she had prayed for herself.

Then they stepped off the promenade into the woodland, and once Tenchi confirmed there was no one around, he took Okayama out of his pocket and began playing.

Come to think of it, since that Sunday three weeks ago when they had first come to this same park, Sakuya's days had been a series of turbulent events.

Struck down by bottomless deep fatigue and emptiness, it was no wonder she sat dazed here at the foot of this great oak.

(— At first, I just wanted to become "deep" with Tenchi-kun.
I came to Inokashira Park, saw chipmunks at the zoo, thought "this is it!"
So I bought a chipmunk, named it Okayama, gradually things got nice between Tenchi-kun and me, I started calling him by his first name, but then realized that was a misunderstanding.

Then Okayama became a girl, and sprouted wings, and I started being jealous of her, and I lost my place, and now here I am.
What am I even doing…)

Sakuya gave a self-deprecating smile and buried her chin in her knees.

Her miniskirt rode up enough to show her white underwear, but she paid no attention.

That day, Sakuya wore a lemon-yellow ultra-mini tight skirt that made even climbing stairs a struggle.

It was a desperate, self-sacrificing, sad act of provocation.

But color-baiting naturally doesn't work well on Tenchi, the prince of the Kingdom of the Oblivious, and in fact it was a futile effort.

Tenchi hadn't even tried to look at her miniskirt.

(— That Washu-san person said it, didn't she.
There are "three ways Okayama is different from a regular chipmunk."
She became a girl, she sprouted wings... what's the third?
Don't tell me she's going to keep growing, become more attractive, grow taller, become an actual human girl.

She's still small now, so it's fine, but if that happened, I'd have completely no chance of winning.
This is scary.
This is painful.
This is lonely.
This is unbearable.
Maybe the Ainu legend really was true.
An ill omen. At least for me, she was an ill omen who brought about something terrible…)

The woods were utterly still.

Only the call of a cuckoo echoed wetly.

Far in the distance, Tenchi's small figure like a sesame seed climbed trees with Okayama.

In that instant, a sudden gust of wind blew through the woods.

The surrounding great broadleaf trees rustled and shook as if writhing.

In that moment, Sakuya realized what she had prayed to Benzaiten earlier.

(— I wish that child would disappear...!)
Was that not the wish she had offered up with such fervent prayer?
But in the next instant, Sakuya shook her head violently, as if to banish the impure thought.

(— No. No matter what, I'm not that rotten a person.
That way of thinking is what I hate most.
Even if the person my boyfriend likes has a girlfriend, that's fine.
I'm the type who takes by force.

So wishing "she would disappear" — I didn't mean that for real.
Because for a child as small and weak as Okayama, one who absolutely couldn't survive alone, "disappearing" means... well, that's what it means, isn't it.
I'm not bad enough to wish for that.
That child has done nothing wrong.
Tenchi-kun cherishes her so much.
To wish that Okayama "disappears" is unthinkable.

Just now, I was a little tired, and a low-level demon that hangs around here possessed me and made me think something stupid.
Of course it is.
Definitely, absolutely…)

"Tenchi-kun! Okayama! Shall we have lunch soon?"

Sakuya forced the dark thoughts to the back of her mind and jumped up energetically, brushing mud from her behind.

But once it had crossed her mind, that "thought" continued to cast its sinister silhouette with tenacious persistence in the depths of her consciousness, like the ruins of a temple floating in fog.

And that night... the "thought" became real.

That Night: "Kamishiro-san, come quickly! Okayama — Okayama is in terrible shape!"

Sakuya had collapsed face-down on her bed without even changing into pajamas when Tenchi's call jolted her from a light sleep.

"She suddenly developed something like pneumonia symptoms — a terrible fever, nearly unconscious... she's dying!"

The voice coming through the receiver was almost a scream.

Sakuya reflexively grabbed her umbrella and flew out of her own front door.

The deep-night rain fell noisily, and the residential streets were lost in melancholy haze.

In the sky, jet-black dense clouds hung low, darkening the gloomy night even further.

There were no cars, no people in the streets.

On the asphalt surface, only the reflected light of mercury lamps flickered like living things in the rain-scattered puddles.

Sakuya threw away her umbrella impatiently and ran, stumbling, toward Tenchi's apartment.

(— Is this my fault!?
Because for even a moment I thought that...!?
Did Benzaiten — no, did the demon grant my "thought" and cause this to happen!?
Am I to blame for this...!?)

Sakuya's face had stiffened with shock and self-reproach.

Of course, it was not Sakuya's fault.

This was the "fate" of the synthetic organism called Okayama.

"She has only one month to live!" Tenchi was crying when Sakuya burst through the door.

"That can't be — chipmunks live eight to ten years—"

"If they're actually chipmunks," interrupted the calm female voice from the receiver.

A voice Sakuya recognized too... Washu's voice, calling from Okayama.

"But she's a synthetic organism I created. Remember I said there were three differences from a chipmunk?"

"She became a girl, she sprouted wings... Oh!"

Tenchi's eyes went wide with horror.

"D-don't tell me... she has a short lifespan!?"

"About one month."

Washu's voice stated it coldly.

"And exactly one week after taking on girl form, her lifespan ends. Like a cicada or a mayfly — does that help you understand?"

"How can you say that, Washu-san!" Tenchi erupted in anger.

"How could you create such a pitiful creature! Toying with life has its limits!"

"That's why people call me a mad scientist."

"Washu-san!" Tenchi shouted sharply.

"And the happiness of a creature shouldn't be measured by the length of its physical lifespan. Which would be better: a full and regret-free month, or decades lived in inertia and listlessness?"

Washu's voice remained perfectly calm.

But Tenchi said in a fierce tone, biting out the words:

"That's sophistry! I never thought you were so cold a person, Washu-san! To be unable to pour even a drop of love on Okayama, despite being her creator... I'm disappointed in you!"

There was a stunned silence from the other end of the line.

Then, after a brief silence, Washu said:

"At that time in the park... I said 'if Tenchi-dono is the owner, I'm relieved'..."

"Ugh..."

"I truly meant that. I thought that if Tenchi-dono took her in, even with a short life, she would be happy. Since then, I haven't done any more gene recombination experiments. I suppose that means I've failed as a mad scientist."

With those words, Washu abruptly hung up.

Tenchi set down the receiver with a pained expression and looked up at Sakuya.

Sakuya was slumped by the desk, staring at the desktop, her whole body trembling in tiny shudders.

On the desk was Okayama.

She lay in the doll-sized bed, beads of sweat on her small brow, breathing with a rasping, whistling sound, delirious with high fever.

From her exhausted, waxen face, the signs of death could be clearly read.

"She has only one month to live..." Tenchi sat beside Sakuya and murmured in a groan.

"Damn it... can this really be happening."

But he seemed to collect himself, and stood up abruptly, going to fetch a dampened tissue and a bath towel, placing the tissue on Okayama's forehead and draping the towel over Sakuya's knees.

"You should dry your hair. I don't want you catching a cold too. Sorry, calling you out this late... I lean on you too much, Kamishiro-san."

Large drops of rain hammered the window glass.

Through the rain-blurred high-rise district, warning lights on rooftops blinked in regular rhythm like heartbeats.

Okayama's breathing grew labored and uneven.

Staring blankly at Okayama, words fell from Sakuya's lips.

"I... I..."

But a rising sob cut her words short.

Sakuya was blaming herself harshly.

She was consumed by fierce self-loathing and guilt, feeling as if her body might shatter into pieces.

Even if Okayama were to bite through her throat at that very moment, even if God's lightning were to tear her apart, Sakuya would have accepted it willingly.

No — she even wished for it.

Of course, none of what was happening to Okayama was Sakuya's responsibility.

But to have used a living being as a tool in her own romantic pursuits, exploited it to the fullest extent — and then, even if only for an instant, at the prompting of a demon's whisper, to have wished for its death... the poverty, the filth, the coldness, the arrogance of her heart...

(— I want to disappear from here right now.
I want to die in Okayama's place.
Okayama, Okayama, Okayama...
"I'm sorry... Okayama...")

Sakuya reached out hesitantly and tried to touch Okayama's cheek.

At that moment —

Okayama's eyes opened softly.

The labored breathing quieted for an instant.

And in a faint, small, transparent voice like the cry of an insect, Okayama began to speak.

In broken fragments, she clearly said this:

"Mas... ter... thank... you... for... cher... ish... ing... me... Ok... a... ya... ma... was... hap... py."

"Okayama!" Tenchi cried as if coughing up blood.

Okayama shifted her gaze to Sakuya.

Sakuya was drawn into those large, adorable jet-black chipmunk-like eyes.

"Sa... ku... ya... sama... please... take... care... of... mas... ter..."

The Final Morning:

Tears welled in Sakuya's eyes and fell silently down her cheeks...

On the second Monday of June, at 5:12 in the morning — Okayama quietly breathed her last breath.

It was the early morning of her twenty-third day in Tenchi's room.

Okayama's remains soon underwent molecular disintegration and vanished as countless seven-colored particles of light.

The room was wrapped in a profound silence, one resembling the noble hush that settles after witnessing the passing of a soul.

Within it, Tenchi stood with his fist clenched tightly.

Sakuya sat at Tenchi's feet, shedding tears without a sound.

Dawn was already breaking.

The rain had stopped, and through the window, the morning glow spread softly.

"...She's gone," Tenchi murmured.

"It was brief, but it was fun. It was happy. I hope she felt the same..."

Tenchi wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes with the back of his hand, then knelt before Sakuya and said quietly:

"Kamishiro-san. I did what I could in my own way. She was incredibly adorable, she was the first gift you ever gave me, and I tried to cherish her in my own way."

(— What!?)

"And... you told me to cherish her as if she were you... I can't tell you how many times Okayama and you overlapped in my eyes. But in the end, I let her die..."

(— You were thinking that!?
Because I said that back then!?
You kept thinking about it until today, all this time!?
I never knew that.
I never imagined…)

"I'm sorry, Kamishiro-san."

(— No.
The one who should apologize is me.
Grimy me.
I don't deserve to be apologized to by Tenchi-kun.
I don't deserve to be loved by Tenchi-kun.
I have no right to love him, no right to monopolize him.
They're all kind.
Tenchi-kun and Okayama both.
But only I am not kind.
I want to become kind.
I want to become a kind person like Tenchi-kun…)

Night gave way to day.

From the eastern horizon, a golden sun showed its face, and bathed in its flame-like rising rays, the large and small buildings all at once turned golden.

Tenchi's room too was filled with transparent, still, divine golden light.

Tenchi's eyes briefly fell to Sakuya's waist.

Then he said hesitantly:

"Hey... it's been bothering me since yesterday, but isn't your skirt a little too short?"

(— He noticed.
He was watching me, after all…)

"...Masaki-kun."

New tears welled in Sakuya's eyes.

Those tears spilled from her eyes, and overflowed her cheeks like a broken dam.

Sakuya didn't call Tenchi by his first name.

Not "Tenchi-kun" — but "Masaki-kun."

She wasn't yet the kind of person who had the right to call Tenchi by his first name.

She hadn't yet become the person worthy of calling Tenchi by his first name.

That unconscious thought was what moved her to say it.

"Masaki-kun!"

Sakuya cried out with wild longing and threw herself into Tenchi's chest.

It was the moment when Sakuya — the embodiment of a playful alter ego — separated from that alter ego and established herself as an independent person.

~End~

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# Love Within a Ten-Meter Radius

Sasami was confused.

She was confused as thoroughly as a bargain sale.

Whether that bargain was Laforet Harajuku's '98 Summer Clearance Sale or Inageyakoheiji's Summer Half-Price Sell-Out would make quite a difference in scale and distinction, but in any case, she had not been this intensely confused since three days ago, when she spent fifteen seconds wondering which end was the head and which the tail of a worm she saw in the back garden.

"That serious face doesn't suit you at all, Sasami-chan."

"Using your brain on stupid stuff is how you end up dumb like Sis."

"Be a child and go play in the garden with a runny nose."

Mihoshi, Ryoko, and Ayeka — the housemates at the Masaki family home — would surely have said something like that had they seen her.

Sasami was, to begin with, quite mature for her age.

She was far more sensible than many a half-baked adult.

Though she had barely graduated from toddlerhood and had just received her provisional license as a young girl, she already possessed a working knowledge of social etiquette, and had not a trace of the irritating, unreasonable, or irrational behavior common in children.

For example — why is the sky the sky? Why isn't a sardine a mackerel? Why don't tears come from your bottom? Why is "ukyaah!" not "dogaaah!"?

She didn't ask these sorts of questions that not even Sartre or Kierkegaard could answer, thereby confusing adults.

Yet she was by no means lacking in "childlike qualities."

Her innocent, adorable smile and her scab-kneed legs were unmistakably those of a child, and her way of openly laughing, openly getting excited, openly sulking, and openly being moved — there was no trace of the precocious brat about her.

One of the six alien women living at the Masaki household in Okayama.

A remarkable beauty who possessed both the purity of a child and the discernment of an adult...

And beyond all this, Sasami had an astonishing special talent.

At only eight years old, she could perfectly perform all the household duties — the "sa-shi-su-se-so"(Japanise ABC’s) of a housewife.

Cooking, sewing, laundry, cleaning, and household management in general went without saying, and she also had encyclopedic knowledge of "grandmother's wisdom": when simmering black soybeans, add old nails to the pot; add second-squeeze bonito to stock for flavor; store onions in stockings hung from the eave; use bath water for laundry and garden watering.

More than that, she sometimes even taught her housemates — all considerably older than her — about proper conduct and the common sense of the world.

The Masaki household was full of morally questionable people, antisocial elements, good-for-nothings, and inhabitants of an irrational world, and Sasami was the only one who could be called a decent citizen.

Truly it could be said that the Masaki household ran on Sasami.

In short, the lovable girl called Sasami was as far from confusion and disorder as anyone could be — the kind of girl the Ministry of Education, the teachers' union, and the PTA would unanimously endorse as the "ideal young girl" — open-hearted, bright, pure, honest, beautiful, and wise.

And yet...

The second Friday of June, 9:38 in the evening.

In her own room on the second floor of the Masaki family home, tucked in a corner of the Okayama mountains.

Sasami was spending her troubled moment nibbling the nail of her right thumb.

Just what was she confused about?

The answer was something quite out of place for an eight-year-old girl.

Something every person, young or old, possesses — but that one feels slightly embarrassed to say aloud — written in a single kanji character.

Not "buttocks."

Why — it's "love."

On this particular day, Sasami had unexpectedly come face to face with the difficult question of what it means "to love."

It had all started from what was not even an unusual daily occurrence.

At the Masaki household, it was the custom for the entire family to gather without fail at mealtimes and eat together around the low table.

The "entire family" in the Masaki household meant the following eight people and one creature:

Ryoko — formerly the most ferocious space pirate in the universe.

Ayeka — the first princess of the Jurai royal family, from the planet Jurai.

Sasami — Ayeka's younger sister.

Mihoshi — a bumbling detective from Galaxy Police.

Kiyone — Mihoshi's partner.

Washu — self-proclaimed greatest genius scientist in the universe, her madness and laughter all her own.

Masaki Katsuhito — the head of the Masaki family, presiding priest of Masaki Shrine.

Masaki Nobuyuki — a pathetic middle-aged man with zero authority by virtue of being a son-in-law.

And Ryo-ohki — Sasami's pet cosmic being.

The ugly yet spectacular battles that these eight people and one creature waged daily over side dishes at breakfast were said to be Okayama Prefecture's third great attraction after peaches and kibi dango — but there's no time to get into that now.

In any case, on this particular day, the following conversation was exchanged at breakfast.

"Delicious! As always, the miso soup Sasami-chan makes is outstanding!"

It was Nobuyuki who spoke first, with characteristic carelessness.

"My daily source of energy — this one cup in the morning! The taste of home, the taste of mother! Reminds me of my late wife's miso soup."

"Quite so," Katsuhito intoned with full dignity.

"The fragrance of the dashi harmonizes splendidly with the flavor of the miso, and the spinach and tofu are not overcooked, maintaining the color, sheen, and freshness of the ingredients themselves. And this secret ingredient is Sasami-chan's alone."

"It's 'cooking is love' as they say, Father!"

"Indeed. Sasami-chan's love has become the exquisite secret ingredient."

"She'd definitely win the All-Japan Miso Soup Championship!"

"If such a championship existed, that is."

"Quite right..."

When Nobuyuki's attempt to recover from Katsuhito's deflating response resulted in a vague mumble — that was when things went wrong.

"With this, it seems the bride for Tenchi is decided as Sasami-chan..."

Instantly, the five boarding girls, who had been in wild animal mode fighting over side dishes, froze their chopsticks and glared at Nobuyuki in unison.

"Oi, old man. What did you just say, huh!?"

Ryoko bared her fang-like sharp canines and came at him in a yakuza-esque drawl.

"You're trying to decide your only son's marriage partner based on the taste of miso soup!? Talking nonsense first thing in the morning, and I'll make you into miso soup ingredients and feed you to the pigs!"

"Ryoko-san is right!" Ayeka also bore down on Nobuyuki with haughty indignation.

"A woman's worth is not determined by cooking skills! A radiant beauty and a generous bust are a woman's decoration. Which means I am the ideal maiden befit of becoming Tenchi-sama's bride!"

"I can't agree on the bust part, but parents meddling in their children's romance is nonsense."

"That's why you never get promoted, Uncle."

"There seems to be a problem with his brain structure."

"I wonder what kind of upbringing he had. I'd like to see the faces of his parents... though his in-law is right next to me."

"People who interfere in other people's love should be kicked to death by a giraffe."

"Nobuyuki-dono needs his head washed and bleached."

Kiyone, Mihoshi, and Washu each raised their voices and pelted the poor Nobuyuki with piercing stares and a torrent of abuse.

Nobuyuki, however, showed no reaction.

He had already fainted at Ryoko's very first glare.

Ryoko and the others, having lost their target, hesitated for a moment about where to direct their anger.

At that moment —

"Sasami wouldn't mind becoming Tenchi-oniichan's bride."

Sasami, who had been watching the whole ruckus with a smile, spoke for the first time.

"In fact, I decided so a long time ago. Because Sasami loves Tenchi-oniichan."

Ryoko and the others fell into stunned silence.

But the next instant, an explosion of laughter burst through the sitting room like a dam breaking.

"HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

"What's so funny, everyone!?"

While Sasami looked on in bewilderment, Ryoko and the others writhed on the floor with laughter.

"D-did you hear that, Ayeka, she said 'loves,' GYAHAHAHAHA!"

"I heard it, loud and clear with both ears, AHAHAHAHA!"

"Just like your older sister, she's hopelessly optimistic, GYAHAHAHA!"

"Shut up you beast, AHAHAHA!"

"Quiet, stupid princess, GYAHAHAHA!"

The idiotic laughter went on for about five full minutes.

Her self-esteem badly wounded, Sasami had been enduring the unwarranted insults while stirring her miso soup with her chopsticks, but eventually she lost patience and cried out:

"There's nothing funny about it! I said 'I love him' because I love him! That's why Sasami is going to marry Tenchi-oniichan!"

Certainly she couldn't admit that last night she had read a trashy shojo manga in bed, been moved by the heroine's confession to her beloved boyfriend — "I love you. I want to marry you and have your children" — and had decided she wanted to say something like that herself if the opportunity arose.

Finally recovering from her fit of laughter, Ryoko looked at Sasami with a teasing gaze.

"Hey, Sasami, do you even know what 'love' means?"

"I know," Sasami pouted. "It means liking someone a hundred times, times, times more than you like them, right?"

"It's similar, but," Kiyone said, "'liking' and 'loving' are subtly different things, Sasami-chan."

"Oh, really!?" Sasami exclaimed in a small voice.

"As far as love goes," Ryoko proclaimed with a puffed chest:

"No one outdoes me, the great Ryoko. I love Tenchi in a way that's seriously, unmistakably, outrageously great. Oh, my lips tingle, my body flushes. Come back from Tokyo quickly. And love me, Tenchi~!"

Ignoring Ryoko's solo erotic one-woman show, Kiyone and Mihoshi each blushed slightly and said:

"For me too, Tenchi-kun is somewhat special. He's innocent and kind, his looks aren't bad either, so maybe it would be all right to say I love him."

"I like Tenchi-san's type too! If he confessed to me, I might just say yes!"

Even Washu made a dangerous, twisted declaration of love.

Then Ayeka suddenly stood up and declared imperiously:

"Oh-ho-ho-ho! Everyone is being so childish. Being able to openly say 'I love him' in front of people is proof of being a child. A person of my caliber — simply picturing Tenchi-sama's face makes my heart go pitter patter — oh my, how embarrassing, how flustered I am... kyaah, oh no!"

With an ostentatious shriek, Ayeka rushed out to the hallway.

A moment later, Ayeka's scream and the sound of a bucket rolling came from down the hall.

She had probably knocked her shin hard against the cleaning bucket.

Normally Sasami would have rushed straight to her sister's side.

But that day, Sasami sat completely still, staring at the fried egg on the low table.

A more important matter than her sister's shin was commanding her heart.

— Everyone loves Tenchi-oniichan, don't they.

They're in love with him...

Sasami already knew that the six alien girls boarding at the Masaki household each, in their own degree, had feelings for Tenchi Masaki, Nobuyuki's only son.

Ryoko and Ayeka's nuisance-level adoration aside, the fact that the Tenchi she loved was equally liked by everyone in the family was a joy to Sasami, not a source of displeasure.

But when you introduce the concept of "loving" into this, things become a little more complicated.

According to Sasami's knowledge, a man and woman who love each other would marry in the near future and have a child who carried both their blood.

Of course, she didn't know the specific process of making a child, but judging from shojo manga and magazine articles, that seemed to be the way of things.

If so, did all six of the alien girls who loved Tenchi become his brides!?

Did all of them have children with Tenchi?

Would Tenchi have six wives, and become the father of six — or more — half-siblings?

Even a walrus or a lion might manage such a situation, but for a human it was clearly unnatural.

Even Sasami could intuit that.

— Which means the "love" I'm thinking about is wrong.

Just as Kiyone-san said, "liking" and "loving" are different things.

So then, what is "love"!?

Does Sasami's "liking" of Tenchi-oniichan not count as "loving"...?

Sasami felt her head growing confused.

"Hey, Sasami," Ryoko asked pointedly, as if seeing through Sasami's disturbance.

"Do you like me?"

"Hm!?" Sasami hesitated for a moment. "Yes, I like you..."

"You really like me?"

"Yes, I really like you."

"Then by your way of thinking, you love me and you'd have to marry me too."

"I suppose so..." Sasami answered in distress.

Ryoko pressed further.

"While I'm at it — do you love your sister?"

"Probably... I love her," Sasami murmured softly.

"And Washu?"

"I love her."

"Mihoshi and Kiyone?"

"I love them."

"Tenchi's father?"

"I love him."

Nobuyuki opened his eyes and flushed his cheeks pink.

But Ryoko shot him a sharp glare and snapped:

"Drop dead, you perverted old man!"

— at which he collapsed back into unconsciousness.

Sasami's heart was in a thousand-piece muddle.

She could see perfectly well what Ryoko was about to say next.

"Tough times for Sasami — a mountain of people to marry."

— See, just as I thought.

I know exactly what Ryoko-sis wants to say.

But I can't say anything back, not a thing...

"I treasure my grandson Tenchi dearly," Katsuhito murmured unnecessarily, adding fuel to Sasami's confusion.

As if on cue, Ryoko shouted:

"Congratulations on your wedding, Grandpa and Tenchi~! Whoo, bang bang bang, pah-pah-pah!"

"That's enough, Ryoko."

Finally, Kiyone and Mihoshi cut in.

"Really, what's fun about picking on a child."

"Ryoko-san, that's a terrible personality trait! Poor Sasami-chan!"

"Look. Sasami-chan is completely deflated."

"I'm not picking on her..."

Ryoko grumbled back.

"Actually I was intending to teach this child about the nature of true love—"

"Then don't be roundabout — just teach her directly!"

"No." Ryoko looked away. "She didn't give me the red noodles at lunch yesterday, so absolutely not."

"You're way more of a child than she is."

"Or rather — Ryoko-san doesn't actually know either, does she? What love really is?"

Mihoshi had hit a sore spot.

But Ryoko, rather than exploding in fury and firing off aura shots, conceded with unexpected ease.

"Hehe, actually you're right. I figured if I stirred things up enough, someone would explain it to me. But since no one's said anything even now... aha, I see — you don't know either, do you!"

Ryoko glanced around the table cheerfully, but Kiyone pretended to search for split ends, Mihoshi danced a bizarre dance, Washu began calculating pi, Katsuhito slurped his tea with dedication, and Nobuyuki continued to play dead.

Ryoko gave a resounding laugh and turned to Sasami.

"Don't be so down, Sasami. Nobody here understands it, so it's only natural that an eight-year-old can't grasp the ultimate mystery of life. But you don't need to force yourself to know it. Love isn't logic — it's practice. As for the relationship between me and Tenchi—"

The long, long, endless love discussion of the Masaki household was abruptly cut short here.

Ryo-ohki knocked over a bowl and spilled miso soup on the tatami, and Sasami had to run to the kitchen for a rag.

Of course this was Ryo-ohki's considerate gesture, out of concern that Ryoko's spicy endless talk might cause further damage to Sasami's heart — and Sasami didn't forget to give Ryo-ohki a grateful smile.

— This too must be one form of "love," I'm sure.

From Ryo-ohki to Sasami.

Though if so, Sasami would have to marry Ryo-ohki too...

## What Love Is

The situation seemed to settle down temporarily.

But Sasami's heart did not recover from the confusion.

Rather, the questions branched out further and further, taking on ever more complex and bewildering forms.

That day, Sasami went about her household duties as usual and paid close attention to the conversations and soliloquies of the others.

What she discovered was:

Ryoko loved alcohol.

Ayeka loved money.

Mihoshi loved her freeloading lifestyle.

Kiyone loved work.

Washu loved mysterious scientific experiments.

Nobuyuki loved the private time watching of his adult videos.

Katsuhito loved the wildflowers and the cypress grove on the hill behind the house.

And Ryo-ohki loved carrots above all else.

Every member of the family had various objects of "love" besides Tenchi.

This showed that a "loving" relationship did not refer exclusively to the romantic connection between a man and a woman, and that it was perfectly achievable even when the other party wasn't a person.

Of course, "love" and "marrying and having children" weren't entirely unrelated...

The situation demonstrated that "loving" was not a concept reserved solely for the romantic entanglements of men and women; it could, quite splendidly, exist even if the object of that affection was not human. While the link between love and the act of marrying to produce children was not entirely nonexistent, it was now painfully clear that the two were not directly synonymous. After all, it was fundamentally impossible for Ryoko to give birth to a "Sake-Human" or for Ayeka to produce a "Money-Human," even if heaven and earth were to turn upside down.[2]

Love was difficult. Sasami didn't quite understand it. Of course, she felt she understood it in a vague, fuzzy sort of way. Words like "love" or "I love you" were seen constantly in books and manga, and they were words girls used often. Both Ayeka and Ryoko used them as habitually as breathing, so Sasami's ears had grown quite accustomed to them—but in truth, it was an incredibly deep word. Her father and grandfather even said it made the taste of miso soup better. Truly, love was difficult to define.

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[2] This is a tenchi muyo joke. literally, heaven ten and earth chi and don't turn this box upside down is (Tenchi Muyo)

Even after napping, taking in the laundry, eating dinner, bathing, and retreating to her room in her pajamas, Sasami's heart remained clouded. Thus, she found herself sitting on the edge of the bay window, nibbling at her thumbnail as she endured a moment of confusion. Outside the open window, a primeval forest of cypress trees stretched out, illuminated by a pale, phosphorescent moonlight. The air was clear to the point of being chilly, and piercing the silence, the cry of a White's thrush echoed faintly like an illusion. Sasami stared blankly at the crescent moon, which looked like a piece of paper cut out and pasted onto the starry sky.

In her hand, she clutched a Japanese dictionary borrowed from Katsuhito. Wanting to know the true meaning of "love," she had just looked it up.

1. To dote on; to think of dearly.
2. For a man and woman to harbor feelings for each other and lean on one another with hearts of intimacy.
3. To have a favorable impression; to feel interest or enjoyment.
4. To treasure.
5. To be reluctant to part with.
6. An abbreviation for "Ireland."

It was an explanation that felt like she understood it, yet didn't. Looking at the literal text, she could only say "fair enough," but she couldn't help but feel that something vital had been left out. Setting aside the sixth definition, the rest didn't seem much different from simply "liking" something.

"Hah."

Sasami tossed the dictionary aside and let out a small sigh. A shadow of melancholy dwelt in her round, transparent ruby eyes, and her freckled nose pointed downward as if dejected. Just then, Ryo-Ohki scurried up to Sasami's leg with a worried look.

"Ryo-chan..."

Sasami smiled faintly and lifted Ryo-Ohki onto her lap.

"Thanks, Ryo-chan. You're trying to comfort me."

"Meow, meow-meow."

"It's okay. I'll feel better soon, so don't worry."

"Meow, meow-ooo-meow-meow."

"That's right, love is a complicated thing, isn't it?"

"Meow."

"Oh, I know! Ryo-chan, what do you think love is!?"

"Uuuu..."

"Ah, sorry, sorry! I'm sorry for asking such a weird thing. You don't have to worry about it that much, Ryo-chan."

To an uninformed observer, it would have been a bizarre sight, but Sasami alone could understand the language of this creature—which looked like a rabbit and a cat divided by two with a hint of dog for spice.

"Meow, meow-meow-meow-meow-meow-meow."

"Yeah, you're right. Everyone else can't explain it either, so maybe it doesn't matter. Ryoko-sis even said there’s no need to force myself to know."

"Meow!"

"...But, you know."

Sasami suddenly dropped her gaze to the floor.

"Ryoko-sis also said this: 'Love isn't logic, it's practice.' I think Ryoko-sis probably knows what love is."

"Meow, meow-aaa!?"

"I'm not joking. She's not very bright, so she can't explain it to others, but Ryoko-sis—no, everyone else—understands it properly. If they didn't, they wouldn't be able to practice it. In other words, Sasami is the only one who doesn't get it..."

"Meow..."

"I feel like Sasami is the only one left out. Like I've been left behind..."

Sasami hugged Ryo-Ohki and whispered lonely.

"I guess I'm still just a child..."

Ryo-Ohki fell silent. Instead, she gently and softly licked Sasami's cheek, as if to say, "Sasami-chan, you aren't all alone." The thrush was no longer singing. A silence like the deep bottom of a pool crept steadily into the room through the window.

In an instant, Ryo-Ohki let out a small "Meow," her eyes going wide as saucers, and as if she had been struck by an epiphany, she smacked her right fist into her left palm. Then, turning toward Sasami, she began to chatter away in Ryo-Ohki language all at once, as if breathless.

"Sasami-chan, why don't you try calling Tenchi-san for advice!? Tenchi-san is smarter, kinder, more serious, and has more common sense than anyone else in this house! I'm sure he won't make fun of you and will give you a proper answer!"

"Nice idea, Ryo-chan! Thank you!"

No sooner had she shouted with a bursting smile than Sasami threw open her door, thudded down the stairs, and snatched up the telephone in the entrance hall with lightning speed. She had the phone number memorized more accurately than her own name. After all, Tenchi was the man Sasami "loved" most. Pushing the buttons rhythmically, she waited excitedly for Tenchi to answer. *Asking the person you 'love' what 'love' is... that's kind of a funny story,* she thought in a corner of her mind.

---

Tenchi Masaki. A first-year student at Tenmangu High School. Grandson of Katsuhito Masaki and the only son of Nobuyuki Masaki. The man Sasami "loved" most. He was also the most beloved person to Ryoko, Ayeka, Mihoshi, Kiyone, and Washu. A former housemate who had lived with Sasami and the others at the Masaki residence in Okayama until just two months ago. Now, he lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment in Shibuya, Tokyo, having left his hometown to train as a Shinto priest at a shrine.

He was a country boy who looked perfectly at home in a straw hat, a tank top, and well water, yet looked deathly out of place with Nike gear, nose piercings, or Evian. Despite his reputation as a pure-hearted boy—naive, late-blooming, dense, and indifferent when it came to romance—rumor had it he was currently in the midst of a "happy-yet-embarrassing" youth, supposedly in a hot relationship with a trendy Shibuya high school girl. That was the kind of boy Tenchi was.

Now, Tenchi sat frozen on the edge of his bed like an Egyptian Pharaoh statue, the cordless receiver pressed to his ear. Having received an unexpected question from an unexpected person, he was at a total loss for a response. The caller, of course, was Sasami.

"W-well, even if you suddenly ask me what love(Ai) is..." Tenchi stammered, finally managing a reply. "I mean, 'ai' is 'eye' in English. Or maybe the ninth letter of the alphabet—"

"That's cheating, Tenchi-brother. Don't do that when someone's asking a serious question," Sasami scolded him sharply from the other end of the line.

"S-sorry. But I'm really bad at the 'love and romance' jungle."

"Genre," Sasami said flatly. "Two yellow cards and you're out."

"Okay, okay, Sasami-chan." Tenchi hurried to sit upright on the bed, straightening his posture. "But I'm really weak at this stuff. I probably can't say anything more than what's in the dictionary."

"I looked at the dictionary earlier. It didn't click."

"Why don't you ask someone at the house!? With that many people, surely at least one of them could give you an answer that makes sense."

"It kind of turned into that situation, but..."

"And? How was it... wait, I don't even need to ask, do I?"

"Exactly. You don't need to ask."

"Right. Grandfather and Dad aren't the types for 'love,' Washu-san would probably give some off-target explanation, I can't expect much from Kiyone-san, I definitely can't expect anything from Ryoko, and Ayeka-san and Mihoshi-san are pretty much the same—"

"Sharp! As expected of Tenchi-brother! You understand home perfectly!"

"Hahaha..." Tenchi gave a wry smile at the odd compliment, but his expression quickly turned serious. "Did something happen, Sasami-chan?"

"Eh!? What do you mean, 'what'?"

"No, I mean, you called so suddenly and asked such a massive question, I thought maybe another incident had occurred at the house."

"It's not... an incident. Everyone at home isn't directly involved... it's just, I talked to Ryoko-sis about various things... Uncle fainted... Ayeka-sis hurt her shin... Mihoshi-san

started dancing... and Sasami started worrying all by herself... and I couldn't solve it..."

From the other end of the phone, Sasami spoke tentatively, choosing her words with difficulty. She was too embarrassed to tell the truth, so she tried to gloss over it by lining up fragments of facts. However, Tenchi didn't seem to take it lightly. He seemed to interpret it as a mysterious incident where victims were appearing one after another at the Masaki house, and Sasami was fighting a lonely battle to handle it despite her own emotional fatigue.

"You've had a hard time, Sasami-chan," Tenchi said with a compassionate smile, his voice filled with care. "You don't have to say it if you don't want to. It must be painful, every day. Taking care of Grandfather, Dad, and those five all by yourself. And on top of that, those people... I'm really sorry. For causing only you so much trouble."

"Not really," Sasami's voice said, sounding troubled. "I'm fine with that. It's actually really fun every day."

"Ugh, that kind of pluckiness is what makes me want to cry." Tenchi looked up at the ceiling as if overcome with emotion, but he quickly regained his smile. "I know! Hey, Sasami-chan, why don't you come to Tokyo tomorrow!? Let's take a walk together for a change of pace."

"Whaaat!" Sasami's voice exploded. "Is it okay if I go!?"

"Tomorrow is Saturday, so there are no classes in the afternoon."

"I'll go, I'll go! I'm definitely going!"

"We'll eat lunch somewhere, go to the park... Arrrrgh!" Tenchi suddenly let out a bizarre scream. "I-I blew it, I forgot... tomorrow afternoon, I have a bit of a prior engagement—"

"Are you going somewhere with that person?" Sasami's voice said casually. "You know, the one who came to the house in Okayama chasing after you about a month ago. I think it was Kumashiro... right, Sakuya Kumashiro. She's your friend in Tokyo, right?"

"You're sharp," Tenchi wiped cold sweat from his forehead. "As expected of Sasami-chan. Sharp, too sharp."

"Everyone praises me, saying I'm a child to be feared." After saying that, Sasami's voice continued meekly. "It's okay, Sasami will go next time. It would be bad for that person."

"I think it'll probably be okay... no, I'll make it okay!" Tenchi said firmly, his breathing heavy with resolve. "Right now, your change of pace is more important! Besides, when I mentioned you to Kumashiro-san the other day, she said if you're such a good girl, she'd like to meet you. So there's the option of the three of us going somewhere. I'll ask her later."

"If it's okay with you, Tenchi-brother, then Sasami is totally okay with it!" Sasami's voice regained its brightness.

"Alright, it's settled." Tenchi stood up and spoke while opening his desk drawer. "The time is 12:30 PM. For the meeting place, I'll draw a map and leave it on the desk, so look at that. If you use the dimensional tunnel Washu-san built, it won't take three seconds to get from Okayama to my place, so leaving fifteen minutes early is plenty of time."

While talking, Tenchi was already moving his ballpoint pen across a memo pad, drawing a map of the area around Shibuya Station. "And, please keep this a secret from Ryoko and Ayeka-san. It'll be a hassle if they tag along."

"Yeah!"

"It's a shame, but Ryo-Ohki has to pass this time too. Unlike Okayama, if she causes trouble in Tokyo, it will turn into a huge uproar immediately."

"Yeah, I understand!" From across the receiver, Sasami spoke with a bouncy voice that sounded like she was about to dance. "Ah, I'm so looking forward to it. I never thought I'd get to take a walk with you, Tenchi-brother. I'm so glad I called."

"Hahahaha."

"The weather looks like it'll be good too. Oh man, I wish tomorrow would hurry up and come."

"Weather!?" Tenchi said, puzzled. "I see... so it's clear in Okayama."

"Yeah. The moon is sooooo pretty. Is it different in Tokyo?"

"It's the middle of the rainy season. The forecast said it would stop around midnight, though." Tenchi glanced out the window. In the darkness of the night where a misty rain fell soundlessly, the skyscrapers of Shibuya were faintly shrouded in haze.

"Talking on the phone makes me feel like you're close by," Sasami whispered thoughtfully, her tone dropping slightly. "Okayama and Tokyo are far apart, aren't they..."

"Yeah. You're right..." Tenchi smiled faintly. A sweet, warm silence flowed between them. Only the scratching sound of Tenchi's pen on the memo pad echoed in the room like the chirping of insects. Eventually, Sasami's small, hesitant whisper came through the receiver.

"...I love you, Tenchi-brother."

"You're growing up fast," Tenchi said gently. "I'm hanging up now. Don't let your stomach get cold, and get some good rest."

"Yeah. Goodnight."

On the desk already lay the map of the Shibuya Station area, with every corner and intersection meticulously drawn.

---

After confirming that Tenchi had hung up, Sasami quietly placed the receiver down. Then, she softly placed both hands over her chest. There was no change in her heartbeat. *My chest isn't pounding*. Like Ayeka-sis said it would. Even though she had said "I love you" out loud. How strange. Why? Did her sister tell a lie?

Sasami tilted her head in wonder as she headed for the stairs. At that moment, a shooting star streaked past the window of the entrance hall. Across the clear starry sky, it flew, trailing a long tail of pure white light.

"Ah...!" Sasami stopped, hurriedly closed her eyes, and spoke quickly. "Mr. Shooting Star, please let the weather be good tomorrow. Please let it be a fun day. And while you're at it, please let me find out what love is!"

Worrying she might have been a bit too greedy, she opened her eyes just as the shooting star vanished, dissolving into the night sky. "Hehe, good, I made it in time."

In a high mood, Sasami lightly climbed the stairs to the second floor. The superstition that a wish would come true if spoken before a shooting star disappeared was a popular one, known to everyone. And because it was so popular, it was generally trusted less than things like a hundred shrine visits or a lucky charm. However, to state the result beforehand: all of Sasami's wishes that night became reality. The next day in Tokyo was perfectly clear without a single cloud, and she was able to spend a

deeply meaningful and fun day. Regarding the third wish, from Sasami's perspective, the harvest was unexpectedly plentiful. Though, it was through an experience that was a bit unusual—or rather, quite unusual; to be frank, an experience that was thoroughly, completely, one hundred percent unusual to the point of being staggering.

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"Hello, Sasami-chan. Welcome to Tokyo."

"Hello. I'm sorry for forcing my way in today. Um, um..."

"My name is Sakuya; and it’s fine."

"Okay, Sakuya-sis."

Second Saturday of June, 12:34 PM. Four minutes late for the appointment, Sakuya Kumashiro appeared at the Hachiko Plaza of Shibuya Station together with Tenchi, wearing her school uniform. With her blue-gray mini pleated skirt, matching vest, and dark brown loafers, she was a typical Shibuya high school girl. After exchanging just a few words, Sasami found herself completely liking this beautiful girl with a cute smile. Her refined, modest makeup and high-sense style were more than enough to earn the admiration of a younger girl. Her speech and behavior were bright, carefree, and without malice. Sasami also appreciated that she didn't treat the little girl from Okayama like a country bumpkin or a mere child. Above all, unlike Ryoko or Ayeka, the fact that she was a "normal person" was irresistibly wonderful!

On the other hand, Sakuya also seemed to have a good impression of Sasami. "You're so cute, Sasami-chan. We couldn't really talk back in Okayama, but you're just as adorable as Masaki-kun said."

*Heh*. Tenchi-brother had told her she was a cute girl. That made her a little happy.

"Seriously, the more I look at you, the more I think you're legit cool. You could debut as a child talent today. Looks like a powerful rival has appeared. If I let my guard down, Masaki-kun might get stolen away."

"Hahaha," Tenchi said with a laugh. "Stop it, Kumashiro-san, don't stare so much. Sasami-chan is getting embarrassed."

In fact, Sasami was a pretty girl. Even in Hachiko Plaza, where stylish young people gathered, she stood out brilliantly. Her dazzling sky-blue long hair tied with a red clip, her transparent ruby eyes like jewels, her intelligent crescent-shaped thick eyebrows, her fine-textured healthy tan skin, and her long, slender limbs that promised a

beautiful future silhouette... her standing figure, coordinated in a small white T-shirt, a pale green camisole dress, and enamel mules, could have easily graced the cover of a children's magazine.

However, Sasami had no awareness of this. At the Masaki house in Okayama, there wasn't a single person with a heart large enough to praise the beauty of others. Therefore, Sakuya's gaze directed at her made Sasami feel shy and awkward, so she couldn't help but say:

"Sasami isn't cute at all. I have tons of freckles."

"That's what's good," Sakuya said. "If anything, they highlight your cuteness."

"My teeth are falling out all over the place, too."

"They're baby teeth, that's natural."

"But, my chest isn't big either. Ryoko-sis and Ayeka-sis always call me 'flat-chest'."

"Hehe," Sakuya laughed playfully. "It's okay. They'll grow naturally as you get older... though I'm not really big enough to be talking."

"You're right."

"Hey, don't say 'you're right'!" Sakuya lightly poked Sasami's forehead with her index finger. Sasami responded by playfully pinching Sakuya's nose. The exchange of greetings was over. Sasami and Sakuya had become best friends.

---

The sky was as blue and clear as a mirror reflecting the sea. The yellowish-white sunlight pushed through the moisture-laden air of the rainy season, stimulating the skin with a pleasant prickle. Sasami, led by the hands of Tenchi and Sakuya, boarded the Keio Inokashira Line from Shibuya to Kichijoji. The train was quite crowded with people enjoying the first clear Saturday in a long time, and the air conditioning was running for the first time that year.

"Masaki-kun, Sasami-chan, I have a request," Sakuya said suddenly with a suggestive expression while hanging onto a strap. "You see, there's an ideal date pattern for girls like this: 'While I'm at the hair salon, my boyfriend waits for me at a cafe.' ...So, sorry, but could you two wait for me at a cafe while I get my hair cut!?"

"Whaaat!?" Tenchi made an openly displeased face. "I can't do that. It might be one thing if it were just me, but Sasami-chan finally came all the way to Tokyo...!"

"There's a hair salon in Kichijoji that's super famous in magazines. I've always wanted to go once."

"You could just go another day."

"Please, Masaki-kun. It's the request of a lifetime!"

Sakuya began listing professional hair-styling terms—cuticles this, conditioning that, Vidal Sassoon, shaggy, bob, spiral perm—emphasizing how excellent the salon was. However, no matter how many words like demonic incantations he heard, Tenchi only blinked and asked the meaning of each word, refusing to nod in agreement.

Watching the two of them go back and forth like a comedy routine, Sasami thought to herself. *This sister 'loves' Tenchi-brother, too.* She had sensed it when they met in Okayama. It was true after all. That made her somehow happy. The fact that the older girl Sasami had come to like "loved" the Tenchi-brother that Sasami also "loved" was somehow wonderful. Before, Ayeka-sis had said, "If by some one-in-a-million chance Tenchi-sama ends up with Ryoko-san, I will shave my head, enter a nunnery, and spend my life beating a wooden fish drum," but Sasami didn't really understand that feeling. It meant you didn't want anyone else to have the person you "loved," right? Sasami didn't feel that way. She wanted the person she "loved" to be "loved" by everyone else, too. She wanted him to be friends with as many people as possible. *Is this wrong...?*

"Sasami is totally fine with it, Sakuya-sis," Sasami said, smiling brightly at Sakuya.

"Thank you, Sasami-chan!" Sakuya pressed her hands together as if in prayer. "Alright, as thanks, I'll buy you whatever you want!"

With Sasami herself saying it was fine, Tenchi had no ground to stand on. He sulked and grumbled, "If Sasami-chan says it's okay, then I guess..." but eventually turned to Sakuya and said grumpily, "I don't like cafes. I'll wait in Inokashira Park."

"There it is!" Sakuya shouted. "Masaki-kun's specialty, Inokashira Park! You really love that place, don't you?"

"What's Ino-kashira-ko-en?" Sasami asked.

"It's a big park right near Kichijoji Station. It has a forest, a pond, and even a zoo so big you'd hardly believe it's in Tokyo. He says the atmosphere is a bit like the mountain behind the house in Okayama."

"Wow!" Sasami shouted, her eyes sparkling. "I want to go! Sasami wants to go to Inokashira Park!"

---

On the way from Kichijoji Station to Inokashira Park, Sakuya kept buying snacks and generously treated Sasami as well. First, they ate soft-serve ice cream from a stand. Next, they had take-out banana crepes. Then, they ate grilled chicken from a tavern's take-away window. They ate grilled corn from a stall. They ate grilled squid. They ate Osaka-yaki. They ate mitarashi dango. They ate bekko-ame. They certainly ate a lot. When Sakuya bought carp food at a shop inside the park, Sasami was momentarily worried she might eat that too. However, the yellowish-brown wafers fortunately ended up in the stomachs of the carp in the pond.

"How long will the haircut take?" Tenchi asked Sakuya as soon as they left the promenade and stepped into the grove of trees.

"An hour and a half... no, maybe two hours."

"Alright!" Tenchi said with the energy of a fish returned to water. "Sasami-chan, let's play! First, we'll climb trees, then go to the amusement park, then go to the zoo and feed the boars—"

"That's not it. Those big events are for when I get back!" Sakuya scolded him sharply. Pulling Tenchi and Sasami by the hands, she led them deep into a deserted grove of trees. Pointing to a wooden bench with peeling paint, she said, "Wait there with Sasami-chan!"

Speaking to Tenchi in a strong tone that brooked no argument, she then performed a strange action. Using a tree branch she picked up from the ground, she began scratching a circle about ten meters in radius into the earth with the bench at the center.

"K-Kumashiro-san...?" Ignoring the bewildered Tenchi, Sakuya completed the circle. At that moment, it seemed to Sasami that the ground inside the circle glowed faintly, but of course, it must have been her imagination.

"Ta-da!" Sakuya brandished a tree branch like a sword. "Behold, the holy barrier created by the White Mage Sakuya. Listen up, you two: you must absolutely not step

outside this circle until I get back. If you take even a single step out, you'll be attacked by the monsters lurking in this park, and I can't guarantee your lives."

"......Thank you, Sakuya-oneechan," Sasami whispered, leaning her lips close to Sakuya's ear. Sakuya handed Sasami two cans of juice and a bag of potato chips she had bought at some point. Then, giving a small wink, she said, "Well, I'm off. Just have a nice chat and wait for me." With those parting words, she ran off like a gust of wind. Tenchi watched her retreating back with an exasperated look before eventually muttering to himself, "Honestly, how selfish can she be... What on earth is Kamishiro-san thinking!?"

"That's not it," Sasami said, her voice filled with a smile of gratitude. "Oneechan was being considerate. Since we haven't seen each other in so long, she wanted us to be able to talk properly, so she left the two of us alone." Tenchi let out a hollow cry that sounded like the braying of a horse. "Wh-whaaat!? Is that how it was!?" Suppressing her laughter, Sasami looked out over the grove of trees once more. The green leaves were so beautiful they practically stung her eyes. The cry of a cuckoo echoed with a damp resonance. A humid breeze carried the fragrant scent of lush grass.

Sasami wondered what she should talk about first. She wanted to tell him so much about everyone in Okayama, and she wanted to hear all about Tokyo. Since Sakuya-oneechan had gone to the trouble of setting the stage, she felt she had to talk as much as she possibly could. Taking a deep breath, Sasami turned toward Tenchi.

As it happened, Sasami and Tenchi were both dutiful and serious people—to a degree that was perhaps slightly beyond the norm. Remarkably, the two of them faithfully followed Sakuya's instructions and did not attempt to take a single step outside the ten-meter radius circle until she returned. Thanks to this, they managed to avoid being attacked by the monsters lurking in the park. However, in exchange, Sasami and Tenchi encountered a series of strange, bizarre, mysterious, and peculiar events the likes of which were rarely experienced elsewhere.

Perhaps it was because the shooting star Sasami saw the previous night had heard her wish. Perhaps Sakuya really was a White Mage. Perhaps that spot just happened to be a spiritual point that invited supernatural phenomena. Perhaps a planetary alignment had occurred. Or perhaps it was because the "Day of a Millionfold Grain," a period of celestial bad luck, and the anniversary of a great-grandmother's death had all coincided to make things turn out this way. At this point, the cause did not matter. For whatever reason, the ten-meter radius circle Sakuya had drawn had transformed into a kind of paranormal space. It had become a wondrous void that transcended time, space, and common sense, incessantly welcoming strange visitors. People after

people visited and departed from that circle. Each of them harbored various forms of "love" in their hearts, and they presented these different facets of love to Sasami. The ten-meter circle became a small universe, like a jewelry box where the seven colors of love intersected like comets.

The first to visit the ten-meter circle was a large, dark-complexioned young man. He bowed to Sasami and Tenchi with a smile. "Hello." "Hello," Sasami and Tenchi replied, returning the bow. The young man sat on the bench next to them. "The weather is nice, isn't it?" he said, looking up at the sky. "It is," Tenchi replied. "The sky is so blue." "It is blue." "You... have a good physique," the young man remarked. "Oh, really!?" "You look like you have good reflexes, too." "They're decent, I suppose."

Still looking at the sky, the young man spoke. "...Won't you join the Self-Defense Forces?" "Huh?" Tenchi looked at the man. "Join the Self-Defense Forces and awaken to the love of your country." "Love of country!?" "That's right. Join the Self-Defense Forces, awaken to the love of your country, and let us die together to protect our homeland." "I think I'll pass... I'd rather not die." "Then join the Self-Defense Forces, awaken to the love of humanity, and let us die together to protect the people of the world." "I'll pass on that too... Either way, I end up dying." "You die," the young man replied. "I'll decline. If I'm dead, I won't be able to love anything anymore," Tenchi said with a wry smile. The young man remained lost in thought for a while while looking at the sky, but eventually stood up quietly and bowed, saying, "Goodbye." "Goodbye," Sasami and Tenchi replied. Tenchi muttered while staring at the man's retreating back, "I wonder if he was a recruiter for the Self-Defense Forces..." Sasami thought to herself that love certainly came in many different forms.

The next to visit the ten-meter circle was a plump, middle-aged woman. "Hello. What lovely weather." The woman cast a gentle smile at Sasami and Tenchi and sat on the bench. "Are you siblings!?" "No. Relatives," Sasami replied. "I see." The woman asked with a gentle smile, "Do you believe in God?" "My family home is a shrine," Tenchi replied. "So, if this is a religious solicitation, we're fine." "Sects and denominations don't matter. There is only one God." "I see." "God's love is great. He pours out His love equally to everyone without discrimination. A pure love, a love that asks for nothing in return... that is the love of God." "I've heard similar things from my grandfather," Tenchi said, looking troubled.

Then, the woman looked at Sasami and asked, "Well then, little girl, do you know the phrase 'Love thy neighbor'?" Before Sasami could answer, Tenchi spoke up for her. "This girl puts that into practice. Not just her neighbors—she loves people throughout the town and the world, and not just humans, but the grass, trees, insects, and mountains. She’s truly a miraculous child." "Yes," Sasami nodded with a bright smile.

"Sasami loves everything! I love everyone!" The woman stared into Sasami's eyes as if peering into their depths, and an even gentler smile appeared on her face. "...It seems there is nothing I can teach you." Leaving behind the words, "Goodbye, child of God," she walked away. Sasami thought to herself again that love certainly came in many different forms.

The third visitor was a pessimistic student studying for his entrance exams. Without even greeting Sasami or Tenchi, the student sat on the edge of the bench and let out a deep sigh. "You look sad, big brother," Sasami said with concern. "Can you tell!?" the student said, looking up. "I can tell by your face. You have a face that says you're lonely because there's no love." "You're sharp for a kid." The student stared intently at Sasami. "Actually... that's right. I'm a prep student. I spend all my time cooped up at home studying for exams, so my world is limited. That's why I can't get a girlfriend, and I can't find love."

"But you're not studying from morning until night, are you!?" "From morning until night. Except for Sundays." "Then why don't you go outside on Sunday!? I'm sure you could find a girlfriend and love." "If I found love, that would be sad in its own way." The student sighed again. "Why?" Sasami asked. "Because love is something that hurts." "Love is something that hurts!?" "Yes. It's been decided since the days of Izanagi and Izanami that when people find love, they always get hurt." "You don't want to get hurt!?" "I don't." "Then it's better to stay at home." "But there's no love at home, right!?" "Right, there isn't." "Isn't that sad?" Sasami's head began to spin, so she ended the conversation there. She felt deeply that love certainly came in many different forms.

The fourth visitor was a gay yakuza. He bore a magnificent tattoo of Ninomiya Kinjiro on his back, and his bare upper body was smeared with blood. The yakuza sat down heavily on the bench and, while catching his rough breath, began to talk without being asked. "It's all the boss's fault, everything... but I was in love with him. He had guts, he was strong, he had chivalry, and he had a hairy chest—he was a damn good yakuza, the boss was." "I-I see," Tenchi said, chiming in to keep him in a good mood while trembling with fear. "You bet. It's no wonder a man like me would fall for a boss like that, right, kid!?" "Y-you're absolutely right," Tenchi said. "At first, it was as leader and follower..." "I-I suppose you'd call that mentor-student love." "Then as sworn brothers..." "I suppose that's brotherly love." "Then as friends with an age gap..." "I suppose that's platonic love." "But at some point, it turned into the kind of love where you're head over heels." "You mean homosexual love!" Sasami shouted in surprise. "Are there loves where men like other men, mister?"

"Little lady," the yakuza rubbed under his nose with a finger, looking proud. "I'm a trendy yakuza. Homosexual love is the kind of love at the cutting edge of fashion. After all, they say that over in America, ninety-eight percent of men are gay." "Lies, total lies," Tenchi whispered in Sasami's ear. The yakuza took on a nostalgic look as he gazed into the distance. "Those were good times. Traveling with the boss, shaking people down with the boss, brawling with the boss, doing time in the slammer with the boss... I devoted myself to him. He took care of me too. Every day was shining..." Suddenly, the yakuza spat hatefully and yelled. "But that woman went and snatched it all away! The boss dumped me and married a woman! That's why I—I did the boss—" "You killed him?" Tenchi asked the yakuza timidly, but the yakuza gave him a puzzled look. "Killed... who, whom!?" "No, I mean, the blood on your body..." "Ah, this!?" the yakuza said nonchalantly. "This is a nosebleed, a nosebleed. See, I got so worked up I peeked into the bathroom to see the boss's private parts. Then my nose just wouldn't stop bleeding. Serve the bastard right!" Sasami thought that while love could have many forms, maybe some were a bit much.

The fifth visitor was a poet. Sasami and Tenchi immediately hit it off with this intellectual and calm elderly man of letters, who wore a beret and puffed on a pipe, and they listened to his story. "I love art from the bottom of my heart, especially literature, and particularly poetry. No, one might even say I love the Japanese language itself." "Wow, so love can be felt for songs and words too," Sasami said, impressed. "Indeed," the poet puffed slowly on his pipe. "However, that is only possible for a tiny handful of us—the breed called artists, chosen by the god of creation." "Hmm, I see." "For example, when one encounters Japanese words with such beautiful resonance as *mahoroba*, *taoyame*, *kagerou*, *nendo*, *chikuwa*, *tebasaki*, *kodakusan*, or *kanashibari*... the trembling of the heart, the quaking of the soul one feels then... well, that is a joy of love permitted only to us." "But that happens to Sasami a lot, getting moved by hearing pretty words. Also, I don't think *kanashibari* is very beautiful."

The poet must have been annoyed by Sasami's remark, as he began puffing frantically on his pipe and said, "I'll thank you not to lump me in with you, little lady. I am a master among masters of loving the Japanese language. In other words—" The poet picked up a twig and wrote the hiragana character 'mi' (み) in the dirt. "When you reach the level of a master like me, just looking at this closed part of the 'mi'—this hole—makes my heart race, my blood pressure rise, and I get lewdly and intensely excited!" "That's amazing!" Sasami was innocently impressed and wrote the character 'yo' (よ) in the dirt with a twig. "Then do you get excited by this character too? It has a hole in it." "Eeek! How lewd!" The poet recoiled. Sasami wrote 'ne' (ね). "How about this?" "Gwah! So sexy!" The poet recoiled again. Sasami wrote 'pa' (ぱ). "And this?" "Myaaa! It has two holes!" The poet recoiled grandly. Getting carried away, Sasami

wrote one character after another: 'nu' (ぬ), 'ho' (ほ), 'su' (す), 'na' (な), 'ha' (は), 'ma' (ま), 'mu' (む), 'no' (の), 'yu' (ゆ), 'a' (あ), 'o' (お), 'ru' (る), 'me' (め)... The poet shrieked at every character and expressed his excitement with bizarre, yoga-like poses, but eventually, his eyes rolled back and he collapsed onto the ground. Apparently, he had reached his limit. Sasami thought that there certainly were some strange forms of love.

The sixth visitors were a couple who were both sadists. "I'm a sadist! I get excited when I bully women! So let me whip you!" "I'm a sadist too! I get excited when I bully men! So let me grind my high heels into you!" They shouted these things at each other as they ran past Sasami and Tenchi like bullets. Sasami thought she didn't much like the idea of love having so many different forms.

The seventh visitors were a couple who were both masochists. "I'm a masochist! I get excited when women bully me! So grind your high heels into me!" "I'm a masochist too! I get excited when men bully me! So whip me!" They shouted as they ran through the ten-meter circle like bullets. "They'd probably both be happy if they just swapped partners with the people from before," Tenchi muttered. Sasami thought she really didn't like the idea of love having so many different forms.

The eighth visitor was a ghost with cancer neurosis. The reason they knew he was a ghost was that although he seemed to think he was sitting on the bench, his body from the waist down was transparent and nonexistent. Even Sasami, who hadn't been fazed by the yakuza, was understandably uncomfortable with ghosts. She wanted to pull the hand of the terrified, frozen Tenchi and run away immediately, but remembering Sakuya’s words about not leaving the circle, she managed to stay seated. The ghost, who looked like a salaryman in a suit, seemed oblivious to Sasami's effort and brought his pale, gloomy face close, speaking in a pleading tone. "Um, I think I might have cancer. My friends say I don't and laugh at me, but don't you think that's just a lie to make me feel better!? Don't you agree!?" "Y-yes," Sasami nodded reflexively, her cheek twitching. "I knew it...!" The ghost's pale face became even paler, turning almost completely transparent. "Ah, I don't want to die yet. You see, I love my family. I don't want to leave them. And yet... I don't want to die, I don't want to die of something like cancer!"

Sasami wanted to point out that he was already dead, but she decided that discretion was the better part of valor and swallowed her words. The ghost, looking exhausted, continued to talk. "If it's cancer, it's probably rectal cancer. My stomach has been feeling off lately..." Sasami swallowed the words, "Mister, you don't even have a rectum." "No, maybe it's skin cancer. Seeing as the athlete's foot on my sole won't heal, maybe that's what it is...!" Sasami swallowed the words, "You don't have feet

either." The ghost was flustered and panicked to a pitiful degree, and he clung to Sasami, crying out, "Young lady, please tell me the truth! Even if it's cancer, I'll endure the fear! So please, tell me the truth!" Having regained some composure, Sasami began to feel sorry for the ghost. So, with great confidence and strength, she said, "Don't worry. Even if you want to die, you won't, and even if you want to get cancer, you won't. It's absolutely true! Sasami guarantees it!" The ghost shed tears of relief and said, "Oh, thank you. Now I can return to my beloved family," before vanishing instantly. He had surely attained Buddhahood with a clear heart, freed from his long-standing cancer neurosis. Sasami thought that there certainly were some troublesome forms of love.

The cry of a cuckoo echoed with a damp resonance. The sun had dipped considerably toward the west, and the sunlight had grown soft. The grove was bathed in the moist, peaceful silence of the late afternoon. Even though the promised two hours had passed, Sakuya had not returned. Tenchi and Sasami sat alone on the bench, patiently waiting for Sakuya's return while drinking their juice and snacking on potato chips. The ten-meter radius circle had become a wondrous small universe where the seven colors of love intersected—Tenchi seemed to have finally realized this. He turned to Sasami and said, "Sasami-chan, it looks like we've gotten ourselves into something troublesome. Either that, or we're both having a very bad dream."

However, Sasami did not reply. She was staring fixedly at a point in the air, lost in deep thought. Tenchi looked at her curiously and waved his palm back and forth in front of her face, but Sasami didn't even blink. Sasami's mind was dominated by the question of what "love" was. In these past two hours, she had unexpectedly seen many different forms of love. Her understanding of love had deepened in its own way, but something was still missing. She hadn't yet grasped the essence of love. "Love is [blank]"—a very short phrase would do. If possible, she wanted to encounter words that would give her the chance to realize the essence of love for herself.

"Sasami-chan!?"

Tenchi called out to her with a worried tone, but Sasami did not respond. Perhaps in an attempt to cheer her up, Tenchi suddenly raised his voice in a bright, forced cheerfulness.

"Ta-da! Time for a quiz! Who was it that brought Snow White back to life with a kiss of love after she ate the poisoned apple and died?"

"...Asano Takumi-no-Kami," Sasami responded in a low mutter, her gaze fixed intently on a single point in the air. Tenchi shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Well, she’s hopeless," and finished off his canned juice in one gulp.

The ninth visitor was a ninja who loved to stand out. His entrance was incredibly flashy, as he suddenly burst through the ground, cracking the earth right before the eyes of Sasami and Tenchi. He complained casually to the two of them, who were silenced by shock, saying that no matter how many times he used the Earth Hiding Technique, he could never grow to like it because it was hard to breathe, his clothes got dirty, and most of all, it didn't stand out at all. He told them he wanted some applause at a time like this, since a real ninja had appeared before them, and urged them to show a little surprise. Sasami and Tenchi gave him a standing ovation with polite applause.

The ninja's acne-scarred face wrinkled with pride as he boasted that he had become a ninja specifically because he wanted to be noticed. He talked about using brilliant ninjutsu to mow down enemies and being a flashy secret agent behind the scenes of history, insisting that being a ninja was a high-profile job. Sasami asked him if being a "flashy secret agent" wasn't a bit difficult and suggested that it might be bad for a ninja to stand out. The ninja raised his voice, telling her not to outshine him with correct logic. He lamented that he never realized ninjutsu was so plain and gloomy until he actually became one, noting that if one stood out poorly, they'd be killed by the enemy, so standing out was a life-threatening gamble. He wondered aloud why there was such a gap between reality and the flashy versions seen in television and manga where everyone cheered. Sasami remarked that one could understand why with just a little thought.

The ninja insisted that he simply wanted to be popular and praised, dismissing his friends' comments about him being a narcissist by claiming everyone was like that. Instead of answering, Sasami and Tenchi simply gave him another standing ovation. Sasami thought to herself that "love" was certainly a difficult thing.

The tenth visitor was a gluttonous man. He took rice balls, sandwiches, and hamburgers out of his backpack one after another, eating them heartily. Because he was quite large, Sasami and Tenchi had to shift their bodies to the side when he sat down on the bench. Tenchi commented on his impressive appetite. The man responded through a mouthful of rice ball, explaining that people tended to get hungry when they were in love. When Tenchi asked if love really stimulated the appetite, the man replied while stuffing snack food into his mouth that he wasn't sure of the mechanism, but he figured that love refreshed the mind and body, boosting metabolism and making one naturally hungry. Tenchi was impressed by this "healthy love" and asked what it was the man loved. The man, munching on a banana, replied that it was eating. Sasami and Tenchi gave him a silent standing ovation. Sasami thought to herself that "love" was quite mysterious.

The eleventh visitor was an elderly ecologist. As soon as he sat on the bench, he looked over the grove of trees with a tender, loving gaze. He began to speak to no one in particular about how the rainy season would soon be over. He described the wind carrying the scent of early summer, the leaves eager to grow, and the flowers and insects busy preparing for sunbathing. Sasami felt a sense of kinship with the old man’s refined behavior and asked if he loved this park. The old man looked at her and replied that it wasn't just the park, but all of nature, including humans. He spoke of loving the eternal earth, the mother sea, and especially the shifting of the seasons. When Sasami asked what the "shifting of the seasons" meant, he explained it as the transition of spring, summer, autumn, and winter—the flow of time itself. Sasami repeated his words about loving time. The old man gave a good-natured smile and admitted his wife often scolded him for neglecting work to stare at the sky and forest. When Tenchi asked what his job was, the old man revealed he was a watchmaker. Tenchi groaned, having suspected there would be a punchline like that. Sasami found herself pondering "love" once more.

The twelfth visitor was an anime otaku with a fixation on young girls. As soon as he saw Sasami and Tenchi, he pulled a cel from a paper bag and began talking incessantly, proudly showing it off. He identified the character as Mume from "Beautiful Face Squad Fancl," claiming he had forced an animation studio to give it to him. He rambled about how lovely and sexy she was despite being seven, and bragged about her famous voice actress. He declared that his beloved Mume was now his alone and demanded that Sasami and Tenchi admit they were jealous. Tenchi, who had been listening to the unpleasant monologue in a daze, remarked on how creepy it was that people like him actually existed. The otaku’s face turned bright red with rage and he screamed hysterically, asking what was wrong with his hobbies or his love for anime. Tenchi tried to tell him that he wasn't judging his personal freedom, but the otaku accused him of being a hypocrite and claimed Tenchi had just made enemies of eighty million anime fans.

Tenchi expressed his pity for the other fans being lumped in with him, which caused the otaku to fly into a complete rage. He flailed his limbs and shrieked in a grating voice, threatening to send chain letters, stalk them, and ruin their lives with silent phone calls, demanding their address. Tenchi stood up and firmly told him not to force his love on others, pointing out that the more he made others miserable, the more unpleasant his beloved Mume would become. Realizing Tenchi was physically stronger, the otaku surprisingly became meek and nodded. Sasami thought to herself that "love" could become beautiful or ugly depending on the person.

The thirteenth visitor was a nurse. Meeting her made Sasami’s heart ache just a little. After a brief introduction, Sasami told the nurse that she looked tired. The nurse

leaned back deeply into the bench, looked up at the sky, and closed her eyes weakly, her fatigue evident on her elegant face. She mentioned she had been working successive night shifts. When Sasami asked if she had any time off, she said it was difficult to come by. Sasami asked if she did it because she wanted a lot of money, but the nurse explained that night shift pay was surprisingly low. Sasami worriedly suggested she should rest so she wouldn't get sick, but the nurse insisted she was used to it. She murmured that she couldn't rest because patients were waiting for her and someone needed her.

Sasami compared this to the devotion and philanthropy she had read about in the biography of Florence Nightingale, noting it was like the unconditional love of God that the religious lady had mentioned earlier. She called the nurse a god, but the nurse smiled weakly and said she wasn't anything so grand; she simply couldn't leave people who were suffering or dying. Sasami felt a sense of solemnity and remarked that the nurse was always giving love, and that it felt unfair if she didn't receive any in return. A shadow of melancholy crossed the nurse's face as she wondered who would give her love, but she then smiled strongly and told Sasami it was fine, because she was an "angel in white." Sasami felt a pang in her chest, thinking that some forms of "love" were both divine and heart-wrenching.

The sunlight faded like an ebbing tide. The grove grew silent as twilight approached, and a cool gloom spread through the trees like unfolding wings. When the streetlights began to flicker in the distance, the final visitor arrived. A small elderly woman in traditional Japanese clothing appeared as if emerging from the darkness. She walked straight toward the bench at the center of the ten-meter circle. Upon seeing Sasami sitting there, she dropped her bouquet and stared with wide eyes. She ran to Sasami, clinging to her knees and sobbing heart-wrenchingly, calling out the name "Kimiko."

Sasami was frightened by the sudden outburst. Tenchi hurried to help the woman up, explaining that she had the wrong person and that this girl was Sasami, not Kimiko. The woman looked up at Sasami with a tear-stained face. When Sasami confirmed her name, the woman became flustered and apologized repeatedly, explaining that Sasami looked exactly like Kimiko. Sasami smiled and told her it was alright. Tenchi picked up the fallen bouquet and handed it back to her. They made room for the woman in the middle of the bench and waited for her to calm down. After about five minutes of quiet reflection, the woman smiled sadly at Sasami and asked if she had been startled. Sasami admitted she was and asked if she really looked that much like the girl named Kimiko. The woman pulled an old, sepia-toned photograph from her bag to show them. The girl in the photo did indeed share striking features with Sasami. Tenchi noted the resemblance in the freckles on the nose and asked if she was the woman's granddaughter. The woman replied that she was her daughter.

Tenchi and Sasami were puzzled by the age of the photo. The woman explained it was from over fifty years ago. Sasami assumed Kimiko must be an old woman now, but the woman shook her head, saying that in her heart, Kimiko was still eight years old. When Tenchi asked if she had passed away, the woman confirmed she had died fifty-four years ago today, in this very spot. Sasami and Tenchi gasped in horror. A cold gust of wind blew through the grove, stripping petals from the woman's bouquet. Sasami felt a numbing sensation in her head as the woman’s voice seemed to drift from far away. She told the story of how she and Kimiko had moved to Kichijoji during the final year of the war after losing their home in the Great Tokyo Air Raid. Despite the poverty and fear, Kimiko had been a bright light, playing in this grove. However, fifty-four years ago on this day, Kimiko was hit by a stray bullet during a dogfight between a Zero and a Grumman fighter.

Tenchi asked if she came here every year on this day. The woman replied that she did, feeling as though she might meet her daughter there. She said she had never forgotten Kimiko’s smile for a moment, and coming to this grove made it feel like the girl might jump out from the shadows at any second. She expressed her happiness at "meeting" her daughter at the place she died on her anniversary, even if it was a case of mistaken identity. Sasami, fighting back tears, said that the woman must truly love Kimiko. However, the woman gave a sad smile and said she had failed as a mother. She explained that if she truly loved her, she shouldn't have remembered her for so long; she should have forgotten her sooner. Sasami cried out that it was wrong to forget her.

The woman looked at Sasami and explained that she believed in reincarnation. She believed that as long as she clung to Kimiko’s memory and wept, her attachment would bind Kimiko’s soul, preventing her from moving on or being reborn. She called her inability to forget a foolish selfishness. Sasami’s tears fell as she asked why it was wrong to love someone who had died. The woman gently cupped Sasami’s cheeks and defined love as thinking of someone’s future and building one together with them. She said true love was found in being able to imagine a bright future for that person. Tenchi agreed, noting that while they were separated, their desired future should be the same: Kimiko training in heaven to be reborn, and the woman living brightly despite the loneliness. The woman smiled softly, admitting she had been a foolish mother for blocking her daughter’s future for fifty-four years.

The woman stroked Sasami’s hair and said that meeting her had helped her make up her mind. She promised to live the rest of her life as brightly as she could and would only remember Kimiko on special days. Sasami threw herself into the woman's arms and sobbed. As she cried, she finally understood what "love" was. She realized it was having a shared dream with someone you like, building a future together, and growing

together. She could imagine a bright future with Tenchi. She knew that to Ryoko or Ayeka, her feelings might seem small or like child's play because she was still a child, but she decided that was okay for now. One day she would be an adult, and for now, it was enough to know she truly loved him. Tenchi whispered that perhaps Kimiko had brought them all together today. Just then, another gust of wind blew through the trees, kicking up dust. When they looked down, the ten-meter circle on the ground had vanished without a trace.

A warm evening darkness enveloped Inokashira Park. A crescent moon hung in the sky, looking just like the one they saw in Okayama. Amidst the flickering streetlights, the faint voices of men and women could be heard from the benches and grass, whispering words of love. Sasami and Tenchi, freed from the circle, walked hand in hand. Sasami enjoyed the warmth of Tenchi’s palm. Tenchi, on the other hand, was grumbling about how long they had been waiting, noting it had been four hours. Sasami suddenly felt a twinge of jealousy regarding Tenchi’s relationship with Sakuya. She looked at him and, with a bit of "love" in her voice, told him she loved him. Tenchi gave a wry smile and called her a "precocious little girl." Sasami placed a hand on her chest, feeling her heart beating fast, and felt as though she had suddenly become an adult.

"This is bad. They must both be angry...!"

Sakuya muttered to herself as she jogged across the intersection in front of the Marui department store and dashed toward Inokashira Park. she grumbled about how crowded the hair salon had been and how terrible the stylist was, swearing never to trust magazines again. However, as she entered the park, she skidded to a halt. She saw Sasami and Tenchi walking across the bridge over the pond, holding hands. To Sakuya's eyes, Sasami looked remarkably grown-up, as if she had aged ten years in just four hours. Sakuya realized she had a real rival on her hands and that if she wasn't careful, Tenchi might actually be taken from her. She took a deep breath, nodded firmly with a look of determination, and began walking toward them with long strides.

# Turning around is an out-of-body experience

Ryoko was angry. She was as furious as a predatory beast. Whether that beast was a lion, the king of the jungle, or a stoat, the fairy of the highlands, would significantly change the extent of the surrounding damage; regardless, she had not been this intensely enraged since the day before yesterday, when she discovered the fact that "Tanuki Soba" did not actually contain raccoon dog meat.

"My, she gets angry every single day. Doesn't she ever get tired of it?" Mihoshi wondered aloud.

"You'd think she would run out of material after eight hundred years," Sasami added.

Ayeka sighed. "Even so, she's become quite docile since coming to Earth. In the old days, she was truly the worst."

If her housemates had seen her, they undoubtedly would have uttered such sighs in unison. In the first place, Ryoko was a woman for whom being angry was practically her profession. Until about a year ago, she had made her living as a space pirate—the kind that could make even a crying child fall silent. Her personality was cold-blooded, cruel, atrocious, and beyond selfish. She was strict with others and lenient with herself. Gifted in the arts of irrational thought and irresponsible behavior, she would fly into a rage over anything that didn't go her way, from the side dishes at dinner to the orbital paths of planets.

Furthermore, she was an unparalleled heavy drinker. If she saw alcohol—be it Beaujolais Nouveau or methyl alcohol—she would gulp it down like a hippo. Afterward, she would glare at anyone and everyone, picking fights over the slightest imagined slight. Naturally, anyone who dared to defy her was promptly beaten within an inch of their life. It would have been one thing if she were the ugliest woman in the galaxy, but she was actually exceptionally beautiful, which made her all the more difficult to handle.

She was one of the six alien women living as freeloaders at the Masaki household in Okayama. A rogue, a criminal, a personality-disordered misfit, and a

good-for-nothing... yet she was a cool-eyed, supermodel-class beauty. However, Ryoko was surprisingly not hated by those around her. At a glance, there were few women as unpleasant as her, but no matter how often she exploded with irrational anger, the people around her only found her a nuisance; they never truly hated her from the bottom of their hearts.

In fact, one could even say they loved her while wearing wry smiles. This was because Ryoko was a child. Deep within her humanity was a hidden, indescribable charm and amiability similar to that of an infant. She had a rough temperament, but no malice. She was selfish, but lacked a persistent, mean-spirited nature. She was short-tempered, but she was so open about it that she remained likable. While her chest and hips were those of a fine lady, Ryoko’s soul remained no different from that of a naive, innocent child.

"When she gets angry, you just have to deal with her appropriately. Ryoko is like a child stuck in a permanent first rebellious phase. She snaps at everything, but her anger never lasts more than five minutes, right? She has zero memory, is quick to heat up, and quick to cool down... it's proof she's a child. So, as adults, we don't need to take her seriously," her housemate Kiyone once said, and those words summed it all up.

That was the kind of woman Ryoko was. And Ryoko's anger was, by nature, that kind of thing. And yet...

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It was the third Monday of June, at 10:14 AM. In the first-floor living room of the Masaki residence, which stood quietly in the mountains of Okayama Prefecture, Ryoko sat cross-legged on the sofa. She was spending a moment of rage with a large sake bottle in one hand. It wasn't just a moment. Since shortly after midnight the previous night, for nearly half a day, she had done nothing but sit there swilling alcohol.

For what purpose? To suppress the anger that surged from the depths of her chest in intermittent waves, like nausea.

Countless empty bottles were scattered across the living room floor. Three dozen large bottles of Asahi Super Dry, seventeen 1.8-liter bottles of Otokoyama, ten bottles of Wild Turkey, eight of Robert Brown, seven of Paiku, five of Akadama Port Wine, three of Yomeishu, and thirty-six liters of rubbing alcohol... The sheer scale and ferocity of Ryoko's anger could be understood from this alone.

To put it bluntly, it wasn't like her. As Kiyone had said, Ryoko’s good point was that her anger didn't linger; it was crisp and clean like linoleic oil(neutral cooking oil). This

time, however, was different. Since last night, Ryoko had held a flaming rage toward "something," and even now, half a day later, she continued to obsessively burn with the flames of hatred. She was steadily breaking her personal record for the duration of a single tantrum.

"Ugh... damn it... no matter how much I drink, my stomach won't stop churning... hic!" Ryoko looked around the room with a completely glazed, heavy-lidded stare. There was no sign of anyone else in the house. The milky, hazy morning sunlight filtered through the windows. The only sounds were the chirping of skylarks and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway.

Likely terrified by Ryoko’s extraordinary fury, the members of the Masaki household had surely fled to the mountain behind the house or locked their doors tightly to hide in their rooms, holding their breath. And that was a very wise decision. The Masaki household consisted of seven people and one creature: Katsuhito Masaki, the head priest of the Masaki Shrine; his son-in-law, Nobuyuki Masaki; the houseguests and princesses of planet Jurai, Ayeka and Sasami; the Galaxy Police detectives, Mihoshi and Kiyone; the mad scientist, Washu; and the space creature, Ryo-Ohki.

All of them were eccentric characters in their own right, no less than Ryoko, but today Ryoko’s condition was simply too "spicy." After all, who would proactively want to communicate with a woman who gulps down a large bottle of sake in three seconds and then proceeds to crunch and swallow the glass bottle itself?

"G-g-g-g... No way!" Ryoko shouted, standing up with a roar as she spat out shards of glass. "I can't stand it after all!"

A dark blue aura erupted from her entire body, and her swaying, sky-blue hair discharged intense sparks of electricity. She had finally snapped. She had exceeded the limits of her patience. "That piece of crap... how dare he do that to my Tenchi... I'll kill him!"

Ryoko spun around and stood before the door in the corner of the living room. The door was firmly locked, but to her, a plywood door was no more than a wafer. With a single punch, she smashed the door to smithereens and leaped inside.

It was Washu’s laboratory. To be precise, it was a pocket dimension connected to the living room of the Masaki residence via a dimensional tunnel. The enclosed space, about the size of the Tokyo Dome and draped in dim light, was packed with countless experimental instruments and analytical devices. Scurrying through the gaps between them was the mistress of the room, Washu, trying to sneak away quietly. Ryoko noticed her instantly and showered her with a thunderous roar.

"Hey! Washu!"

"Eek...!" Washu froze and looked back timidly. What flew into her field of vision was a close-up of Ryoko’s face, looking like a poorly made Hannya mask.

"Gyaaah!" Washu leaped back like a grasshopper. Backing away, she pleaded desperately. "I-I’m sorry! I was wrong, Ryoko! If I did something to annoy you, I apologize, so please forgive me! I’ll do anything to make it up to you... if you want me to bow on the floor, I will. I’ll confess everything I know. I’ll tell you where the treasure is. I’ll draw a map. I’ll keep a morning glory diary. I’ll even do the octopus dance! So—"

"Did you do something bad to me!?" Ryoko glared at Washu with bloodshot eyes.

"No," Washu shook her head vigorously. "I have absolutely no memory of doing such a thing."

"Then don't act so pointlessly subservient!"

"Aye-aye, Captain!" Washu straightened her back and saluted.

"Honestly," Ryoko continued indignantly. "Don't do things that pour oil on my fire! And you call yourself the greatest genius scientist in the universe? Can't you even figure out why I'm angry!?"

"How should I know that?"

"What’s with that attitude!?"

"But..." Washu replied with a face like she was about to cry. "You just told me not to be subservient."

"Don't talk back!" Ryoko grabbed Washu’s crimson hair and lifted her up. Washu, who was only about the height of a primary school student, hung in the air like a salted salmon, but she seemed to have resigned herself to her fate and let it happen. Peering into Washu's face, Ryoko said with a terrifyingly evil smile, "Hey, Washu... actually, I've got high hopes for you. I have a little favor to ask."

"What is it, Captain!?"

"...There's someone I want you to kill."

"K-Kill!?" Washu’s steel-blue, acorn-shaped eyes widened in shock.

"That's right," Ryoko nodded heavily. "That piece of pig-crap, I can't let him live anymore. I want to kill him right now... but damn it, I can't lay a finger on him. So, I want you to make me a drug to assassinate him or something."

Washu gasped and was momentarily speechless. Killing was no light matter. Granted, Ryoko had been a space pirate until a year ago. And not just any space pirate. She flew freely, phased through walls, teleported, and released aura bolts with the destructive power of proton bombs. For hundreds of years, she had exhausted the limits of violence and destruction across the great galaxy. She had attacked 14,000 spaceships, large and small. She had destroyed 23 planets. The total cumulative damage to the universe was approximately seven trillion Space Dollars. She was a Class-A criminal who would certainly face 300 million light-years of imprisonment if caught.

However, she had never actually killed a person. She frequently shouted things like "I'll kill you" or "Die," but she had never once followed through. At most, she left her victims with injuries requiring six months to heal. Of course, since dead men tell no tales, no one could know for sure, but officially, that was the story. Yet now, Ryoko was openly showing a malicious intent to kill and asking for Washu's help in an assassination. This was extremely, exceedingly, very much not peaceful.

Washu must have thought so too. Swallowing hard, she asked Ryoko with a tense expression, "Kill... just who exactly are you talking about?"

"The Cold," Ryoko replied.

"A cold!?"

"Yeah. The virus."

"The virus!? Is that some foreigner's name?"

"No!" Ryoko screamed in frustration. "A cold! A cold, like the illness! I want you to kill the cold virus!"

Washu's acorn eyes turned into dots. Her jaw unhinged and hung down low.

"Whoa, a miracle of the human body! The mystery of life! The ultimate party trick!" Washu slowly brushed off the hand of the staring Ryoko and escaped her "salted salmon" state. After silently popping her jaw joint back into place, she looked up at Ryoko with a sullen expression and questioned her. "...In other words, what!?"

"What!?"

"You want me to cure a cold!?"

"Yeah." Ryoko nodded with surprising honesty.

Washu pressed further. "You want *me* to make cold medicine!?"

"Yeah," Ryoko nodded again.

"And that's why you broke into my room!?"

"Yeah."

"And the reason you've been acting wild since last night is because of a cold!?"

"Yeah."

"And the reason you were gulping down all that booze was because of a cold!?"

"Yeah."

"Whose cold do you want cured? Yours?"

"No." Ryoko shook her head.

Washu let out a long sigh and, looking annoyed, picked her ear with her pinky finger. "Honestly, you're more trouble than you're worth. So!? Who's the one who caught the cold?"

Ryoko immediately shouted with a bright, open smile. "Tenchi! ❤️"

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Two months ago, there had been one more resident at the Masaki house in Okayama. Katsuhito's grandson and Nobuyuki's only son—Tenchi Masaki. Ryoko and the other houseguests had each been led by the mysterious threads of fate to meet Tenchi and live under the same roof, but there is no time to detail that now. However, it must be said that the reason Ryoko has temporarily retired from space piracy and put on unfamiliar clothes over her armor of "atrocity" is Tenchi.

Ryoko loved Tenchi. Tenchi was the only man in the vast universe that Ryoko loved. That said, Ryoko was a woman who completely lacked "maidenly" desires or fantasies regarding romance. Tenchi, currently a tenth-grader, was also widely reputed to be a pure-hearted boy—naive, late-blooming, dense, and indifferent when it came to love. Therefore, just because they lived together didn't mean their relationship had made any dramatic progress. Ryoko would constantly hang around him saying "I love you,

Tenchi! ❤️" and Tenchi would return a complicated smile that was half-annoyance and half-happiness; that had been the unchanging state of the two for the past year.

Even those scenes had barely been seen for the past two months. This was because Tenchi, who was destined to become the head priest of the Masaki Shrine, had left his hometown alone to train at the Tsuchida Tenmangu Shrine in Tokyo and was currently living in a one-room apartment in Shibuya. However, Ryoko was not particularly sad or lonely. While it would be a lie to say she wasn't lonely at all, she could go to Tokyo in a matter of seconds using the dimensional tunnel Washu made. Above all, she believed a woman shouldn't interfere when the man she loves makes a decision regarding his own future.

Ryoko thought this quite admirably. Oh, could that space pirate Ryoko, who had plunged the galaxy into the depths of fear and despair and made the name "God of Destruction" her own, really become such a meek and cute woman in just one year? In short, that was how deeply Ryoko loved Tenchi.

At any rate, Washu finally learned the reason why Ryoko had been drinking heavily and acting out since last night. However, she probably didn't feel she had the full picture yet. Upon leaving her room and sitting on the sofa in the living room, Washu asked Ryoko, who sat opposite her.

"Something's still not clicking for me. Hey, Ryoko, what exactly happened last night? How did you find out Tenchi-dono had a cold? And why do you go wild just because he has a cold!?"

Ryoko then began a desperate explanation, mixing in exaggerated gestures like a folk dance. However, she was failing to get to the point. Her descriptions were incomplete, she kept going off on tangents, and to begin with, her memory itself wasn't clear. For Ryoko, the advanced task of logically conveying past experiences to others in words was simply impossible. Still, Washu patiently layered question upon question, sometimes filling in the gaps of memory with her imagination, and finally managed to hear everything from Ryoko.

The events that befell Ryoko last night were as follows:

Under a sky full of stars and a coldly shining crescent moon, the mountain ranges covered in primeval cypress forests stretched out in silence, bathed in silver moonlight. The crescent moon swayed on the surface of the lake. Beyond it, on the shore, stood the Masaki residence—a stylish two-story wooden house.

The sound of a telephone ringing could be heard. Holding a sake bottle in one hand and the receiver to her ear, Ryoko waited in high spirits for the call to connect. She hummed a little tune to herself, "Tenchi, Tenchi-Tenchi, Tenchi! ❤️"

The call connected with a click. From the receiver came Tenchi's voice. "Hello, this is Masaki—"

"Hey, Tenchi! It's me, your beloved Ryoko. You doing okay? Wait... huh?"

Tenchi's voice continued, "I'm sorry, but I'm currently out. Please leave a message after the beep." There was a loud beep. It was an answering machine message.

Disappointed, Ryoko muttered, "Tch, what? An answering machine? How boring... But where would Tenchi go this late at night—" She suddenly looked up. "Wait... could it be... with that girl Sakuya who's always hanging around him!?"

In Ryoko's delusion, Sakuya—the beautiful classmate who was developing a hot relationship with Tenchi—brought her lips close to his and kissed him. They embraced. They went to bed together.

Back in reality, Ryoko's head "erupted," and party whistles stuck in her ears and nostrils blew out. "Te-te-te-te-Tenchi!" Exploding with rage, she dashed away.

Running into the living room, Ryoko jumped. "I won't forgive you!" She plunged into the entrance of the dimensional tunnel set into the ceiling.

In a one-room apartment in Shibuya, Tenchi was lying in bed with a cold, coughing. Suddenly, the bed flashed with light, the duvet was blown away, and Ryoko appeared. The exit of the dimensional tunnel was Tenchi's bed.

"Whoa! R-Ryoko...!" Tenchi cried out in surprise.

Ryoko glared at him. "Hey you, Tenchi! How dare you fool around with that brat while you have a steady like me!?"

"W-What is it, Ryoko? Why are you here so suddenly!?"

"Don't play dumb! I know everything! Taking advantage of living alone to flirt behind my back—huh?" She blinked. "Wait.. Tenchi, you were here the whole time?"

"I was here… yes ugh."

"Ah, Tenchi!?" She rushed to catch him as he stumbled, but noticing his body was abnormally flushed, she gasped. "You're hot...!"

Tenchi’s hand pulled a thermometer from his mouth. Ryoko looked at it. "39.8 degrees... that’s a terrible fever."

Ten minutes later, Ryoko looked at Tenchi lying in bed with pity. "I see, you were in bed with a cold..."

"Sorry, Ryoko," Tenchi said weakly. "I couldn't pick up the phone. *Cough, cough*."

"Don't worry about it. I just haven't seen your face lately, so I thought I'd have a drink with you. But another time is fine." Ryoko smiled in relief and whispered to herself, "...So he wasn't out playing at night with Sakuya."

"Did something happen with Kamishiro-san!?"

"Huh!? Ah, no, it's nothing!" Blushing, she tried to cover it up. "B-but really, that Sakuya girl is heartless, isn't she? Not even coming to visit you."

"Kamishiro-san is in bed with a cold, too. An out-of-season cold is going around the school."

"Oh, is that so."

In the kitchen, a kettle hissed on the stove. The alarm clock on the desk passed midnight. Ryoko sat by the bed, watching over Tenchi with concern as he occasionally coughed. "...Did you take any medicine?"

"I didn't."

"Why!?"

"There's no specific cure for a cold. Resting quietly is the best thing."

"What about food?"

"I heated up some instant porridge." Tenchi gave a wry smile. "...When you get sick, you really realize it. It's nice having a lot of people at home after all."

"Tenchi..." Ryoko said encouragingly. "Don't worry. Tonight, I'll stay right here and look after you. If there's anything you want me to do, don't hesitate to ask."

"I appreciate the sentiment... but go home now, Ryoko."

"What!?"

Tenchi smiled gently despite his pain. "It would be bad if you caught my cold."

Ryoko was struck by his kindness. "Tenchi... I-it's okay, I won't catch it. I've never been sick in my life. You know what they say, 'Idiots don't catch colds.' Since I'm the biggest idiot of them all... Hey! Who are you calling an idiot! Who!?"

Ryoko tried to cheer him up with a solo comedy routine, but Tenchi had closed his eyes and looked pained. "Ugh...!" She smiled sadly. "Yeah... you can't sleep quietly if I'm here..."

She stood up and tucked in the edge of the duvet. "Get well soon, Tenchi."

In the darkness of the night, a flash from the activation of a dimensional tunnel leaked from the window of Tenchi's room in a one-room apartment in Shibuya.

It was a simple scene, really—the kind of trivial episode one might expect between a man and a woman in love. However, it had taken Washu nearly an hour of struggling to pry the story out of Ryoko.

"I see. I understand perfectly now why you're so desperate to assassinate the common cold virus," Washu said, sinking deeply into the sofa, utterly exhausted.

"Oh, so you understand my painful feelings! I'm such a devoted, thoughtful woman to my boyfriend. I actually make myself feel touched by my own sweetness. *Sniff, sniff, sob*..." Ryoko wept sorrowfully, shedding amber-colored tears. The tears were amber only because she had smeared leftover whiskey from the bottom of an empty bottle onto the corners of her eyes. Ignoring the cheap act, Washu folded her arms and fell into deep thought.

"So!? You're going to help me, right, Washu-sensei!?" Ryoko peered up at Washu, using a sugary, coaxing voice. Contrary to Ryoko's expectation that she would agree with a lighthearted attitude, Washu knit her brows.

"Cold medicine... that's a tough one," Washu replied.

"Wha—!?" Ryoko shouted in disbelief. "It's a cold! Just a cold! There's no way the greatest scientific genius in the universe can't cure a simple illness like that."

"It galls me to say it, but I can't. Not this one."

"For real!?"

"For real."

"For real for real!?"

"For real for real," Washu said, shrugging her shoulders. "It’s an incredibly common illness, but the cold and athlete's foot are surprisingly profound diseases. Colds are especially troublesome. There isn't just one type of virus, and they change every year. Just as Tenchi-dono said, a miracle cure doesn't exist."

"But if you go to a pharmacy, they sell tons of cold medicine."

"Those are all symptomatic treatments. They lower your fever if you have one or suppress your cough, but they can't kill the virus itself. Well, if you catch a cold, staying warm and sleeping is the best thing. Again, just as Tenchi-dono said."

"Hmm, is that how it is...?"

"Don't underestimate the cold, Ryoko." To the dissatisfied Ryoko, who was tilting her head in doubt, Washu delivered the final blow. "Look, you know about Astrone, the strongest space monster in the universe that lived on Planet Dorugoda in the Cygnus D-37 star system? Even he died the year before last from complications of a cold."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat! That monster died from a cold!?" Ryoko’s face became a perfect replica of Munch’s *The Scream* as she pressed her palms against her cheeks. She began to wave her arms frantically like a chicken, screaming in a panic. "Gaaah! I didn't know! I didn't know a cold was such a dangerous, incurable disease!"

"Well, that’s only if it gets serious."

"If Astrone kicked the bucket, Tenchi doesn't stand a chance!"

"If it gets serious, yes."

"He’s gonna die! Tenchi is going to die soon!"

"That’s why I said *if* it gets serious."

"If Tenchi dies, I can't go on living either!"

"Well, at least the universe would be peaceful then."

"Don't say such cold things! *Waaaaaaaah!*"

"Did you call me?"

"I didn't call you, I’m crying! *Waaaaah, waaaaah, waaaaah...!*" Ryoko slumped over the table and wailed, her tears gushing out in torrents. This time, the tears were real. Washu scratched her head in perplexity, watching Ryoko's scene of woe for a while. Eventually, she gave a small, resolute nod.

"Alright... I’ll give it a shot."

"Eh!? Really, Washu!?" Ryoko lifted her face, which was now a messy blur of tears and snot.

"Yeah," Washu nodded. "Since it’s for Tenchi-dono, I’ll find a way. Fortunately, I have some research I’ve been putting effort into lately. If I apply that, I think I can make a cold medicine with outstanding effectiveness. However, it will take a little time."

"How long?"

"Three hundred years."

"Gack!" Ryoko recoiled with a snap and froze, her face turning into Picasso's *Guernica*.

"Nahahaha! Just kidding, just kidding!" After a moment of cheerful grinning, Washu’s expression returned to one of seriousness. She thrust out her right index finger with strength. "One hour. I’ll make it in one hour! Leave everything to the greatest scientific genius in the universe, Washu-chan!"

"Washu... I’m counting on you!" Ryoko wiped her tears and nose on her sleeve, her expression turning sharp and serious as she stared straight at Washu. "You have to save Tenchi!" Her expression was more serious than it had ever been—so serious, in fact, that Washu felt a literal shiver of excitement. But what followed was the problem. In the end, Ryoko was still Ryoko. "While I’m asking..." Ryoko inquired solemnly. "Washu, there’s one thing I want to ask."

"What is it, Ryoko!?" Washu asked back, bracing herself.

"Is it true that... you can catch a cold if you do 'it'?"

"Gwah!" Washu hurriedly held her jaw with both hands to keep it from falling off. "Wh-where on earth did you hear a theory like that!?"

"Which means... Oh, so it’s not true." Ryoko’s face brightened without a care. She kicked off the floor and soared lightly through the air as if dancing a waltz. "I see, so it's not! I was sure Sakuya had done something naughty with Tenchi and that's how the

cold got passed on. Well, well, it’s not true. I worried for nothing! Ahahahahahaha!" The crying crow had already begun to laugh.

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Washu emerged triumphantly from her room after fifty-seven minutes—three minutes earlier than promised—having completed the miracle cold medicine. What Ryoko received was a small, orange tablet that, at least in appearance, looked entirely ordinary. With barely a word of thanks, Ryoko hurried to Tokyo using a dimensional tunnel.

To jump to the conclusion: the cold medicine Washu created showed magnificent results. The cold virus was expelled from Tenchi’s body almost instantly; his fever broke, and his cough subsided. Furthermore, even chronic ailments and physical irregularities other than the cold were wiped away. Tenchi became a specimen of perfect health that even the gods might envy. However, it was not all good news. In exchange for gaining this health, Tenchi, like Dr. Faust, ended up losing something more important to a human being than health itself. It was the side effect of the medicine. The cold medicine Washu created actually harbored a side effect that was incredibly troublesome. Here, one must remember: while she called herself "The Universe's Greatest Scientific Genius," others called her—and her true nature was—the "Universe's Worst Mad Scientist"!

*Ryoko is actually pretty beautiful...* Tenchi thought vaguely amidst his clouded consciousness, drifted by high fever. Ryoko’s face was looming right in front of him in a massive close-up. *No, not just "pretty."* Looking at her closely like this, she was a stunning beauty. Her sexy, cool gaze. Her deep amber eyes. Her charming, slightly upturned nose. Lips like ripe currants. A face with deep features like a Greek sculpture, where expressions changed rapidly. Her sky-blue hair was dazzling to the eyes, and even through her black bodysuit, it was clear she had the proportions of a fashion model. *I see, Ryoko is actually an incredible beauty. Why didn't I notice until now? How could I live with such a beautiful woman for nearly a year and not feel anything? Even though Ryoko was always telling me she loved me. Is it because there’s a problem with her personality!? Or am I just underdeveloped and dense!? Probably both. Well, I guess we’re even... Wait.*

Did Ryoko just put something in his mouth? This texture... I see, cold medicine. She came all this way to give him medicine because she was worried about him. He felt somewhat happy. Ryoko had her good points after all. *Whoa! W-what is this medicine!?* It was stupidly bitter. No, it wasn't bitter, it was deathly sweet! No, not sweet, it was sour! Just when he thought that, it was spicy! Then it was salty! What on earth was this!? *Damn it, Ryoko, giving me such a weird medicine.* But... somehow,

he felt incredibly good. He felt as though everything dirty and cloudy was being drained from his body. It felt like the time he had secretly drunk medicinal wine behind his grandfather's back, or like napping by the riverbank after final exams were over. Was it the medicine? It felt wonderful. So wonderful... and he was intensely sleepy. Sleepy... sleepy... sleepy...

On the third Monday of June, at 12:37 PM, Tenchi, having taken Washu’s special cold medicine, began to sleep with peaceful breaths in his bed. Ryoko and Washu let out sighs of relief and smiled at each other.

"That’s that. The next time he wakes up, every single cold virus will have been expelled from his body, and he should be back to full health," Washu said.

"Really, Washu!?"

"Washu-chan doesn't lie. Ha! ♥"

"I see." Ryoko smiled, her face crinkling with satisfaction, and asked Washu, "When will he wake up?"

"In about thirty minutes, I’d guess."

"Then I’ll go to the convenience store and buy some lunch. Tenchi’s probably gonna be hungry."

"Good idea. I’m starving, too."

"Right, I’m off." Ryoko took Tenchi’s wallet from the desk and headed for the entrance with a light step. At that moment, something like thick, pure white smoke wafted lazily from the sleeping Tenchi’s mouth and nostrils. It was ectoplasm. It was Tenchi’s soul, departing from his body. However, Ryoko, who had already put on her shoes and had her hand on the doorknob, had no way of noticing.

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Despite the rainy season sky that looked ready to cry at any moment, the Shibuya shopping district was bustling with crowds.

Clusters of buildings decorated with primary-colored signs exhaled a sweltering, common vitality, which the passing cars slowly stirred. In the midst of this, Ryoko walked silently with her head down, searching for a convenience store.

While it would have been easy to find one with a glance from above, flying in full view of the public was not a very wise act. However, for a person capable of flight,

walking while being jostled by a crowd was not a very pleasant experience. That sense of restriction and pressure was almost a form of terror. Moreover, Ryoko did not like buildings. Those rectangular, vertical blocks of stone looked like nothing but gravestones to her. Super-high-rise buildings were a father’s grave, medium-sized buildings were a mother’s grave, and low-rise multi-tenant buildings were a child’s grave... Ryoko felt a heavy sense of omen and walked quickly and silently in search of a store.

A likely shop was not easily found. To begin with, there were no convenience stores on the main streets of Shibuya, though there were plenty of takeout places like hamburger shops. One could buy and eat all the hamburgers or crepes they wanted. However, Ryoko lacked the knowledge and wisdom to shift her perspective. Consequently, after wandering honestly through the streets of Shibuya, it was half an hour after leaving Tenchi’s room when she finally found a convenience store on the edge of town.

"Good grief, that was quite the 'First Errand,'" Ryoko muttered as she stepped out of the shop carrying a plastic bag filled with three lunch boxes and cans of beer. "Tenchi’s probably awake by now. I’ve gotta hurry..." She started to run, speaking to herself. But she stopped dead in her tracks. In an alleyway between a mother’s grave and a child’s grave, she had spotted a familiar figure.

"Tenchi...!" It was indeed Tenchi. There was no mistaking it. The face, the build, even the faint voice reaching her ears—it was unmistakably the man himself. "Wh-what’s the meaning of this?" Ryoko murmured, frozen in confusion. "Isn't Tenchi supposed to be sleeping at home...!?"

Ryoko’s confusion didn't end there. There were four other suspicious points. First, Tenchi’s fashion was completely unlike him. A crimson bandana wrapped around his head, baggy sweatshirts and pants, and knock-off Air Max sneakers... it was the look of a shallow, flashy street punk. Second, his expression was not like Tenchi. Third, his dialogue was not like Tenchi. Fourth, what he was doing was not like Tenchi at all. Tenchi was actually engaged in a massive brawl against a group of local street punks.

"Ora ora oraaah! What's wrong, what's wrong, what's wrong!? Where’s that energy you had a minute ago, huh!? If you’re gonna pick a fight, go train your bodies some more! This is boring! You guys are pathetic!" Shouting foul language, Tenchi mercilessly struck down nearly ten punks one after another. The tide of battle was overwhelmingly in Tenchi’s favor. The punks' attacks all hit thin air, while Tenchi’s punches accurately caught their faces, jaws, and solar plexuses. Some crouched while spurting nosebleeds, some clutched their stomachs and vomited, some writhed with

shattered jaws, and others rolled around with broken arms... In the midst of the gruesome scene, Tenchi alone was unscathed.

"Damn it! I'll kill you!" A long-haired punk who seemed to be the leader pulled out a knife and lunged at Tenchi from behind. Tenchi dodged it easily with brilliant footwork, but the tip of the knife grazed his cheek, drawing a thin line of blood. Rather than being intimidated, Tenchi gave a wicked, evil grin as if enjoying the fight. "...Kill me then. If you can." Standing tall, a cold, cruel, and murderous aura rose from Tenchi's entire body like a heat haze. The battle was decided. The punks trembled with fear.

"D-damn it, just you remember this!" "Picking on weak kids is wrong!" "I'm telling the police on you!" "I'll sue you for assault!" Leaving behind parting threats filled with a law-abiding spirit, they scrambled away.

"Hmph." Left behind, Tenchi spat on the ground and, like a gunslinger in a Western, walked gallantly into the darkness of the alley. "Damn, what an annoying day. Maybe I'll go shake someone down or hunt some old guys to change my luck. Though lately, my back hurts whenever I move. Maybe I should see a doctor..." He muttered as he went. Ryoko watched the entire scene with pink cheeks and an enchanted expression.

"Tenchi... so cool." Then, snapping back to her senses, she shouted, "Wait, this isn't the time for that!" She started running after him. However, no matter how much she searched through the alleys and streets, she couldn't find him again. Instead, at Spain-zaka, she witnessed another Tenchi. Not the previous one, but a "different Tenchi." With that face and voice, there was no room for doubt that it was him. But once again, Ryoko could only stand there in confusion.

"I-I can't believe it... Tenchi, doing something like that...!" Tenchi was dressed in a suit like a club host, wearing a flippant, slimy smirk, and was hitting on every woman passing by. "Hey, hey, hey, girl! Want to grab tea!? ...No? Then how about you over there? ...No!? Then how about you!? That miniskirt looks super good on you. I'd love to take it off. If you don't want tea, a hotel is fine. ...Eh, get lost? Don't be so cold. It's a waste not to use such a great ass." Suddenly, Tenchi stroked an office lady's backside. The woman screamed and slapped Tenchi's face with all her might.

"What do you think you're doing, you pervert!"

"Shut up! You should be grateful I even touched you, you ugly hag!" Tenchi spat back like a lowlife and began looking around for his next target. It was a pathetic display of behavior, a textbook example of a scumbag. To make matters worse, this Tenchi seemed to be suffering from a bad case of athlete's foot, as he was constantly

scratching the soles of his feet even while flirting. Ryoko moved beyond confusion; a smoldering anger began to rise within her. "That bastard Tenchi, acting so pathetic... I'm gonna deck him!"

However, a split second before Ryoko could strike, a male high school student dressed neatly in a school uniform slammed Tenchi into the ground with a lightning-fast shoulder throw.

"Wh-what are you doing, you bastard!" Tenchi shouted, his face turning pale.

"Silence, you despicable cad! What you have done is an unforgivable act, whether viewed from a moral, ethical, common sense, or legal standpoint! Even if Heaven overlooks it, my sense of justice will absolutely not forgive you! As a man—no, as a human being—have some shame!" The high school student, whose acne-covered face and metal-framed glasses gleamed with a dignified attitude like a class president as he denounced Tenchi, was also... Tenchi.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaa! There are two Tenchis!" Ryoko shrieked at the top of her lungs and began running around in a frantic state. To add to the chaos, the noisy sound of a Nichiren Buddhist drum began to ring out. Dressed in Shinto priestly robes, carrying a Bible, beating a Buddhist drum, and shouting verses from the Zoroastrian scriptures, a street preacher of an ambiguous religion appeared... and he, too, was Tenchi!

"What the hell is thisssssssss!" Reaching the height of her distraction, Ryoko took flight like a bullet, heedless of the public eye. She flew at high speed straight back to the apartment where Tenchi lived. "Wh-why are there so many Tenchis... why are they dressed like that and acting like that... Am I seeing an illusion!? Or a dream... am I having a bad dream from a hangover!?" Ryoko leaped through the half-open window into Tenchi's room.

"Welcome back, Ryoko. What's wrong? You took quite a while, didn't you!?" Ryoko was unable to answer Washu's casual question.

Ryoko stood frozen like a statue, her lips trembling in shock. Tenchi sat in formal *seiza* style on top of the bed, wearing his pajamas.

There was no way the Tenchis she had seen in the city could have returned home faster than Ryoko, who had flown at high speeds following the shortest path to the apartment. In other words, those Tenchis were entities separate from the one standing before her eyes. Furthermore, since he was wearing pajamas, the Tenchi in front of her was undoubtedly the "real" Tenchi who had been suffering from a cold until just a moment ago.

“T-Tenchi...!” Ryoko froze like a statue, her lips trembling in shock.

“He just woke up a moment ago. His fever is down to normal, and his cough has stopped. Tenchi-dono’s cold is completely cured.” Washu, seemingly oblivious to Ryoko’s agitation, peered into the plastic convenience store bag. “Ah! A Big Kalbi Roast Beef Bento! I’m taking this!” she cried out innocently, snatching the bag from Ryoko’s hand. “Why don’t you eat yours before it gets cold, Ryoko? Case closed!”

Despite this, Ryoko remained standing there, stunned, unable to move a muscle. Tenchi’s behavior was strange. Something was just... off. It was certainly Tenchi himself, but something was different. He lacked any sense of vitality or dynamism; he gave off a strangely limp impression. His eyes, staring blankly into the void, were devoid of life, as if he had lost his soul.

Then, Tenchi looked at Ryoko and offered a listless, hollow smile completely drained of emotion. “Huh-hahahaha...”

A cold shiver ran down Ryoko’s spine.

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“Those were Tenchi-dono’s souls—the ones you met, Ryoko.” Washu, having heard the summary of the situation from Ryoko, spoke nonchalantly while munching on her Big Kalbi Roast Beef Bento.

Ryoko, who had been swigging a beer to steady her nerves, sprayed it out with a loud “Pfft!” and screamed, “Souls?!”

Then, Ryoko turned on every light in the room, went to the kitchen to wash her hands, performed three somersaults, turned off all the lights, and finally began twisting her limbs in a sort of interpretive dance. Her mental confusion had reached such a peak that she was forced to engage in absurd and inexplicable behavior. Washu watched Ryoko’s dance with amusement while packing away her lunch.

Eventually, having finished her dance, Ryoko regained some composure and looked at Washu suspiciously. “Hey, Washu... you’re awfully calm about this.”

“Naturally,” Washu said, sucking on a pickled plum. “It’s all going according to calculation.”

“According to calculation?!”

“Yep. That cold medicine did everything.”

“Wh-what?!” Ryoko’s voice rose in shock. “So, this is your doing?!”

“Well, you can pretty much assume that eight out of ten supernatural phenomena around here are caused by me.”

“Don’t brag about something so stupid! Explain what’s going on!”

“Ah, that was delicious. Thanks for the food.” Washu let Ryoko’s anger slide off her like water off a duck’s back, tossed aside the empty bento box, and slowly began her explanation while sipping lukewarm tea. “Lately, I’ve been obsessed with research on extracting life energy from living organisms and materializing it. To put it simply, i’m research into creating artificial ghosts. That cold medicine was an application of that technology to cure Tenchi-dono’s cold. In other words, what I gave him was a spiritual separation drug.”

“Spiritual separation...” Ryoko tilted her head. “I’ve heard of astral projection, but...”

“Strictly speaking, the spiritual body and the astral body are completely different things, but since you’re an idiot, Ryoko, you can just think of them as the same thing.”

“The 'idiot' part was unnecessary! Keep going!”

“Don’t you get it? When the spiritual bodies separated from Tenchi-dono’s physical form, they took the illness with them. That’s why his cold was cured in an instant.”

“Then, the ones I met weren't illusions? They were really Tenchi’s soul... Tenchi’s 'insides'?” Ryoko leaned forward anxiously.

“The genuine article,” Washu nodded. “Though they are ghosts. Since the physical body is still alive, I suppose we should technically call them *ikiryo*—living ghosts.”

“But,” Ryoko leaned in further, “their personalities were different, and they were wearing ridiculous clothes.”

“Clothes are whatever the living ghost feels like wearing. They are materializations of formless energy, after all.”

“But, but! The Tenchi ghost I met was a total lowlife punk! If you tell me that’s Tenchi, I just can’t—”

“There’s a theory about living ghosts,” Washu said, cutting Ryoko off. “They separate from the body to fulfill the person's latent desires, acting on their behalf. I don’t know what the spiritual Tenchi-donos did, but there’s a possibility it was something Tenchi-dono secretly wanted to try—his true feelings.”

“I-I can’t believe it...!” Ryoko muttered blankly. “Getting into pointless fights, hitting on girls, acting like a self-righteous prick, or recruiting for a weird religion... if that’s Tenchi’s true self, I’m disappointed. I totally misjudged him!”

“That’s a bit harsh on Tenchi-dono.” Washu pressed the pump on the air pot to fill the teapot, pouring the hot tea into cups for herself and Ryoko as she continued. “The human spirit and personality are complex, multi-layered structures. Even the best person hides a savage self, a lewd self, or a self that wants to cling to faith deep in their heart. It’s just a matter of how much reason, morality, and ethics can suppress them. I think we should be happy that Tenchi-dono isn’t just some stiff, shallow man, but a perfectly normal human being.”

“I guess...” Ryoko didn't 100% buy Washu's explanation. However, after processing it through her own distorted understanding, she muttered, “Well, one of them was a fighter so strong I almost felt a kinship with him. Maybe that's why Tenchi and I get along...”

Washu’s eyebrow twitched. She didn’t miss Ryoko’s casual remark. “Wait, Ryoko, what do you mean by 'one of them'?”

“Huh?!”

“Did you perhaps meet *multiple* spiritual Tenchi-donos?”

“Yeah.”

“How many?”

“Four.”

“Huh.” Washu’s steel-blue eyes went wide. “That’s a bit surprising... Hey, Ryoko, were all four of them perhaps carrying some kind of ailment?”

“Ailments? Hmm... come to think of it, one said his back hurt, one seemed to have athlete’s foot, one had a face full of pimples, and the guy doing the religious recruiting seemed to need to pee; he was fidgeting with his knees together the whole time.”

“I thought so,” Washu nodded deeply. “Tenchi-dono had several physical issues that weren't quite 'illnesses.' Probably lower back pain, athlete’s foot, acne, and slight kidney fatigue... that’s why multiple spiritual bodies appeared. Which means...” Washu’s face lit up brilliantly. “That medicine doesn’t just work on colds, it works on everything! Incredible, incredible! If I mass-produce and market this, I’ll be the richest person in the universe! Well, Tenchi-dono is fully recovered, so all's well that ends well! Oh, how wonderful, how wonderful!”

Washu pulled out two small Japanese flags from nowhere and began a dance of joy. Ryoko watched her blankly. Eventually, she asked hesitantly, “I hate to rain on your parade, but... when is Tenchi going to go back to normal?”

“Eh?!” Washu stopped her dance and, along with Ryoko, looked at Tenchi.

Tenchi was still sitting in *seiza* on the bed. Wearing a vacant smirk, he was using a toothpick to pick up individual grains of rice from his bento and eating them slowly, one by one.

“Tenchi...?!” Tenchi showed no sign of responding to Ryoko’s call, silently continuing to move rice grains to his mouth. Ryoko pressed Washu for an answer. “Hey, when is Tenchi going to snap out of this daze and go back to normal?”

“He’s not,” Washu said simply. “Tenchi-dono stays like this.”

“Like this?!” Ryoko was startled.

“Yeah. His soul is gone, so he’s literally in a state like his soul is gone. It’s only natural, right?!”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!” Ryoko let out a scream loud enough to make the window glass rattle and fell backward dramatically. She almost started her interpretive dance again but immediately snapped out of it, grabbed Washu by the collar, and yelled, “W-W-W-Washu! You brat, what have you done?! Why would you put Tenchi through something so horrible?!”

“W-Why?!” Washu blinked in confusion. “I just cured Tenchi-dono’s cold.”

“Don’t screw with me!” Ryoko pressed her, fuming. “Even if the cold is cured, it’s not funny if he turns into this spaced-out shell of a man! You think it’s okay for Tenchi to stay an idiot like this?!”

“I kind of felt like it might be okay...”

“Like hell it is!”

“It’s j-just a little side effect! Every medicine has side effects!” Washu, now thoroughly intimidated, tried to persuade Ryoko in a soothing tone.

However, that wasn't enough to quell Ryoko’s rage. “A 'little'?! Tenchi isn't Tenchi anymore! My Tenchi is gone!” Ryoko lifted Washu into the air by her collar and shook her violently. Washu’s head swung back and forth like a cocktail shaker.

“Au-au-au-au-au! Stop it, Ryoko! I’m going to get whiplash!”

“Shut up!”

“I’m gonna barf! I’m getting motion sickness!”

“Then drink a ton of that medicine and cure it!”

“Are you kidding?! If I do that, I’ll become a soulless idiot—Ack!” A shadow of shock crossed Washu’s face as if she’d been doused with cold water. By putting herself in Tenchi's shoes, Washu finally realized the gravity of the situation.

Ryoko was crying. Large tears spilled from her amber eyes. While weeping, Ryoko collapsed to the floor, clinging to Washu, and squeezed a painful cry from the depths of her throat. “Put Tenchi back... give Tenchi back to me... please, give my Tenchi back... give him back... give him back!”

“Ryoko...” Washu looked down at Ryoko sadly, but then, setting her jaw with determination, she gave a firm nod. “Alright... I’ll find a way. Just give me a little time!”

She turned on her heel, crawled into Tenchi’s bed, and returned to the Masaki residence in Okayama via a dimensional tunnel. Left alone, Ryoko looked at Tenchi through tear-filled eyes. Tenchi had finally finished his bento and was drinking tea with that same vacant smirk.

“Tenchi...!” Ryoko buried her face in Tenchi’s lap. But there was no reaction. *No. This isn't Tenchi. This absolutely isn't Tenchi. If I were crying, Tenchi would comfort me. If I hugged him, Tenchi would smile awkwardly. This... this isn't Tenchi. But... it’s my fault. It’s all my fault. If he’d become like this because of an illness or an accident, I could bear it. I could think 'No matter what he looks like, Tenchi is Tenchi.' But he’s like this because of me. Because I tried to be helpful and did something unnecessary. I have to change him back. If I don't bring the old Tenchi back, I’ll never forgive myself. If Tenchi doesn't return to normal, I’ll kill myself...*

Fresh tears overflowed from Ryoko’s eyes, wetting the knees of Tenchi’s pajamas. Yet Tenchi, wearing his vacant smirk, showed no reaction whatsoever.

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Washu returned from Okayama in about fifteen minutes. In her hand, she held a strange small mechanism. It was made of an empty cola can, bamboo sticks, and rubber bands—it looked like a primary school student's summer homework project.

“I didn't have much time, so I made it from materials I had lying around, but the performance is solid,” Washu declared forcefully, brushing aside Ryoko’s skeptical look. “Now, Ryoko, first, put Tenchi-dono to sleep.”

“Okay.” Ryoko moved behind Tenchi and performed a magnificent Northern Lights Suplex—the finishing move of wrestler and House of Councillors member Hiroshi Hase. Tenchi, hitting the back of his head hard on the floor, fainted instantly without even a cry.

Immediately, Washu pressed the bamboo stick of the device against Tenchi’s forehead and pushed the switch. The device started up with a sound like a pig having a seizure and soon displayed a value on the liquid crystal screen.

“4.1, huh... what an awkward number. Maybe I should have made it out of a Peach Nectar can instead of a cola can.”

“What’s that number?” Ryoko asked.

“The number of spiritual bodies that separated from Tenchi-dono. Well, it’s a rush-job machine so there might be some error. If we round it, it’s four, so let’s just assume there are four of them for now.”

“Four, huh? That’s exactly the same number I met. So?! What do I need to do?”

“Isn't it obvious? Catch the spiritual Tenchi-donos and bring them all back here.”

“Bring them back... how? I don’t know where they are, I can’t just bring them back.”

“You figure out the method. Use their personalities and behavior patterns as clues—do some questioning, or set traps to lure them in. I haven't met them, so I can’t help you there.”

“Fine,” Ryoko nodded. “Thinking isn't my strong suit, but it’s to save Tenchi. I’ll do my best.”

“Just bring them here, and I’ll leave the rest to this machine.”

“What is that machine, anyway?!” Ryoko stared suspiciously at the device, but Washu puffed out her chest with confidence.

“It’s the machine for injecting Tenchi-dono’s spiritual bodies into his physical body. I’ve named it 'The Machine for Injecting Tenchi-dono's Spirit Bodies into his Physical Body'.”

“That’s literally what it is.”

“I didn't have time, what do you expect?” Washu pouted. She then added, “Also, as you probably know, spiritual bodies will pass on and vanish from this world after a day, or sometimes seven days, or forty-nine days, so you absolutely must recover them before then.”

“Thanks for the 'nice' advice!” Ryoko smacked Washu hard on the head.

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Violent Tenchi.

Ero-Tenchi.

Justice Tenchi.

Religious Tenchi.

Ryoko named the four spiritual Tenchis accordingly. To capture them, as Washu said, she had to "use their personalities and behavior patterns as clues—do some questioning, or set traps to lure them in." So, Ryoko began to think of specific methods.

She wrapped a "Certain Victory" headband around her head, put on thick nerdy glasses, crossed her arms, and thought and thought. She thought so deeply and seriously that she felt as if she had never thought so much since being born in some cosmic garbage dump. As a result, she developed a nervous fever, and her body temperature rose by about twenty degrees, but she continued to think relentlessly, cooling her heated body with cans of beer.

On the third Monday of June, at 5:46 PM, as the sunset dyed the western sky orange and the city of Shibuya, adorned with dazzling neon signs, welcomed its artificial morning, the operation finally began.

The first target was Religious Tenchi. Finding him somewhere in Shibuya wouldn't be very difficult. If she played the role of a miserable girl who desperately needed religious help to skillfully stimulate his "religious heart," he should show himself quite willingly.

Convinced of this after long contemplation, Ryoko first threatened the owner of a second-hand clothing store to obtain an anachronistic evening dress—the kind Marie Antoinette might have worn—and a tiara studded with fake jewels. She put them on in the public restroom of Miyashita Park, then stood on the street at Penguin Street and began a hammy performance worthy of the Takarazuka Revue.

“Oh, God! Is there another beautiful girl in this world as miserable as I?! My parents have passed away, my lover betrayed me, my stepmother bullies me... I have no money, no dreams, no hope! If I bet on horses, I lose everything; if I play pachinko, the pins hate me! Dogs bark at me, I fall into ditches, and to top it off, I have 108 incurable diseases! I’d rather just die! But I don’t want to die! But then again, I do want to die! Oh, God, where are you taking a carefree nap?! A beautiful girl more miserable than a screenwriter chased by deadlines is weeping tears of grief here, so why won’t you give me a million yen?!”

Passers-by looked at Ryoko with disgust, as if watching someone dangerous. But Ryoko ignored those looks and continued to wail in a high-pitched falsetto voice that echoed through her skull.

The strategy worked. The faint sound of a Buddhist hand drum gradually grew closer and stopped right behind Ryoko. *Here he comes!* Ryoko mentally applauded and turned around. A street missionary wearing Shinto priest robes, carrying a Bible, and holding a Buddhist drum... it was definitely Religious Tenchi. Religious Tenchi, fidgeting his lower body as if holding back urine, spoke to Ryoko in a sugary voice filled with religious mercy.

“You seem to be in quite some trouble, young lady who feels familiar for some reason?!”

“Yes. In fact, such and such...”

“I don’t really understand 'such and such,' but God will surely reach out a hand of salvation to you. Come, let us pray together.”

“Pray? In which religion?” Ryoko asked. “What religion do you believe in?”

“No particular religion,” Religious Tenchi replied with a smile. “It is foolish for religious people to fight over sects or denominations. There is only one God, one religion. Originally, all religions were one.”

*I see. So that’s how Tenchi thinks about religion. This mishmash of an outfit was meant to express that idea. I get the sentiment... but this look. It’s definitely not my taste, at least. If this were a fake Tenchi it wouldn't matter, but he’s technically a piece of the real Tenchi. It makes me want to cry...*

“Now, young lady who feels familiar for some reason, let us pray to the Almighty God together.” Religious Tenchi gently took Ryoko’s hand.

In that instant, Ryoko pulled Religious Tenchi’s arm toward her and threw him with an Exploder—the finishing move of wrestler Jun Akiyama. Religious Tenchi, hitting the back of his head on the road, fainted easily without even a cry.

“Alright! One down!” Ryoko tucked up the hem of her evening dress and, ignoring the onlookers watching with exasperated faces, dragged Religious Tenchi along like a bear that had caught a salmon.

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In Tenchi’s room, Washu was waiting eagerly. “He’s quite covered in scratches.”

“Really?! Maybe because I dragged him here.”

“Don’t be so rough. He is still Tenchi-dono, after all.”

“Fine, I’ll switch to air transport next time.”

While having this conversation with Ryoko in front of the scratch-covered Religious Tenchi, Washu set up the 'Machine for Injecting Tenchi-dono's Spirit Bodies into his Physical Body.' The "setting up" simply involved winding up the rubber band power source as tightly as possible and setting the stopper.

“Preparation complete.” Washu wiped the sweat from her forehead, stared intently at Religious Tenchi lying on the floor, and shouted solemnly, “Now, 'Machine for Injecting Tenchi-dono's Spirit Bodies into his Physical Body'! Activate your hidden, great, true power!”

The stopper was released, and the machine started up again with its pig-seizure sound. Ryoko held her breath and watched the proceedings. Then, the tip of the machine's bamboo stick glowed faintly and shone a pink spiritual wave at Religious Tenchi.

What happened next was incredible. Religious Tenchi, bathed in the spiritual light, turned into a thick, pure white ectoplasm and was sucked into the empty cola can of the machine, just like a genie returning to its lamp.

“Liquefaction complete! Now we just have to make Tenchi-dono drink it!” Once the ectoplasm was completely sucked in, Washu placed the mouth of the can against the lips of Tenchi, who was sleeping in bed. Tenchi gulped down the contents, and in less than ten seconds, he began fidgeting his lower body as if he were holding back urine.

“That’s what Religious Tenchi was doing... which means the spiritual body returned to Tenchi’s body!” Ryoko beamed and let out a cry of joy. Washu, her voice bright with undeniable happiness, said to Ryoko, “For something I made in fifteen minutes, it works perfectly. Keep it up and get the other three, Ryoko!”

“Yeah!” Ryoko clenched her fist firmly.

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The next targets were Ero-Tenchi and Justice Tenchi. In a sense, these two required less technique to lure out than Religious Tenchi. If she simply wore some "sexy dynamite" clothes and scattered some sex appeal around Shibuya, including some panty flashes, Ero-Tenchi would undoubtedly show up, and Justice Tenchi would soon follow to condemn Ero-Tenchi’s misdeeds.

So, Ryoko threatened a guy at a "Burucera"[3] shop and stole a girl's uniform from Tenmangu Private High School—the school Tenchi attended. It was a blue-grey mini pleated skirt with a matching vest. She put it on in the public restroom of Miyashita Park again and began wandering around the Dogenzaka area.

Men passing by took sidelong, lustful glances at Ryoko as if they were at a strip show. Adding to her top-tier looks, her clothing was sexy in the extreme. Since she was deliberately wearing a uniform that was too small, her blouse bulged at the chest to the point where the buttons were nearly bursting, and her white high-leg panties couldn't stay hidden under the mini-skirt—it was beyond a panty flash; it was almost a full reveal.

*This is pretty embarrassing...* Even Ryoko couldn't help but feel that her appearance was transparently provocative.

Pathetically, she was reunited with Ero-Tenchi immediately. Like a foolish black bass, he bit the bait in less than five minutes.

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[3] A used panties shop

“Whoa, what a great look you’ve got there, girl!” Ero-Tenchi leaped out of an alley like a flash of lightning, wearing a lewd smirk as he took in Ryoko’s back view. “It’s like a pig walking around carrying breadcrumbs and shredded cabbage. If you want to be eaten that badly, you should have just told me sooner. Hey, girl, you’re dying for it, aren't you?! Then why don't you come to a hotel with me?”

*Seriously, no matter how many times I meet him, he’s a jerk. Just hearing his voice makes me want to puke. If he weren't Tenchi, I’d twist his balls off...* Ryoko suppressed her boiling rage and disgust, turned around, and put on her best friendly smile.

“My, my, it’s been a while, Tenchi-kun! ♥”

“Gah! Y-You’re Ryoko...!” Ero-Tenchi flinched for a moment.

“Oh, don't be like that! Call me Ryoko-chan! ♥” Ryoko twisted her body, speaking in a tone sweeter than Uno Kanda and more childish than Hinano Yoshikawa.

“Hmm, I wonder what brought this on. To think that *you* of all people would end up like this...”

Ero-Tenchi scratched at his athlete's foot, watching Ryoko’s once-in-a-lifetime performance with an air of admiration. “Well, I guess even I should try some weird food once in a while. Since it’s you, I already know what you’re like, so I don't have to bother with all that crap like flattering you or feeding you first. Besides, once a woman closes her eyes, they’re all the same anyway. Come on, let’s go to a hotel.” With those words, he grabbed Ryoko by the arm and began walking briskly.

“Oh stop it, Tenchi-kun, you’re so impatient! Ah~n♥” Despite her foolish smile, Ryoko was starting to panic. *Hey, hey, isn't it about time you showed up, Justice Tenchi...?*

“What are you looking around for, Ryoko?!” Ero-Tenchi asked.

“O-oh, nothing, it’s nothing...” Ryoko’s cheek twitched as she forced a wide, toothy grin. *Ugh, this is bad. Super bad. I'm not kidding. If things keep going like this, something terrible is going to happen. I wouldn’t mind giving myself to Tenchi, but I absolutely refuse this Tenchi. I’d rather be bitten in the navel by a pig and die than have sex with a piece of trash like this. Hey, your precious Ryoko-chan is in a pinch! Ryoko-chan’s chastity is in danger! Hurry up and get out here, Justice Tenchi...!*

“Let’s go here, Ryoko.” Ero-Tenchi’s voice snapped Ryoko out of her inner world and back to reality. They were standing in front of a run-down flophouse in a corner of Shibuya’s love hotel district.

“Come on, get in.”

“But, I...” Ryoko stiffened and backed away.

“What?! You’re saying no now?!”

“It’s not that, but...”

“Then let’s go in.”

“But, I...”

“What?! You’re saying no now?!”

“It’s not that, but...”

“Then let’s go in.”

“But, I...”

“What?! You’re saying no now... Hey, cut it out! Don’t keep repeating the same conversation!” Ero-Tenchi suddenly pulled Ryoko close. “If you don’t want to go in, I’m fine with doing it right here!” he shouted, and then he firmly grabbed her breast through her blouse.

The thread of Ryoko’s patience snapped with an audible pop. “Whaaaaaat do you think you’re doooooing?! You goddaaaaamn perveeeeeert!” Showing her true nature as a space pirate, Ryoko let out an evil scream and slammed Ero-Tenchi into the ground with the Tsutenkaku Special—the finishing move of female pro-wrestler Dynamite Kansai.

It was then. “Halt, you greatest scoundrel in the land! Do you seek to sink your poisonous fangs into an innocent maiden once more?! I, Masaki Tenchi, shall punish you!” The pimple-faced Justice Tenchi appeared gallantly, the hem of his school uniform fluttering stylishly.

However, Ryoko immediately caught Justice Tenchi’s body mid-motion. “You’re too late, you idi-ooooooot! You bast-aaaaaaaard!” She threw him with a brilliant Japanese Ocean Cyclone Suplex Hold—the finishing move of female pro-wrestler

Manami Toyota. Both Tenchis hit the backs of their heads hard and fainted side-by-side like a pair of pillows, without even letting out a cry.

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“You look quite exhausted, don’t you?!” Washu said.

“Of course I’m exhausted,” Ryoko replied, her face looking haggard and gaunt. “Having the dark side of the man I love shown to me so vividly... well, it was probably heavily exaggerated, but either way, it’s bad for the heart...”

The 'Machine for Injecting Tenchi-dono's Spirit Bodies into his Physical Body' was operating smoothly. The ectoplasmic Ero-Tenchi and Justice Tenchi were successfully returned to Tenchi’s body. Ryoko peered at the forehead of the sleeping Tenchi. A single, small pimple had appeared there. Meanwhile, Washu confirmed that athlete's foot had developed on the soles of Tenchi’s feet and nodded with satisfaction.

“Only one left... It’s a lot of work, but do your best, Ryoko.”

“All right!” Ryoko slapped her cheeks to psych herself up and stood up despite her tired body.

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The final target—the discovery and recovery of Violent Tenchi—was expected to be difficult. It was unlikely he would fall for a childish trap like the previous three, nor was it expected that he would be captured quietly without resistance. Naturally, a situation where she would have to fight back was likely, but fighting while holding back to avoid hurting Violent Tenchi would require a very high level of technique.

“Well, it’ll work out... or rather, I have to make it work,” Ryoko muttered to herself as she walked through Shibuya Center Street late at night, crowded with young couples, high school girls in loose socks, street gangs, and drunks. Wandering aimlessly around the vast city of Shibuya offered a low chance of encountering Violent Tenchi. However, Ryoko wasn't looking for Violent Tenchi himself right now.

“Ah, there they are...!” Ryoko’s eyes caught sight of the group of local street gang members who had been beaten to a pulp by Violent Tenchi during the day. Those with faces covered in bandages, arms in casts, neck braces for whiplash, or cotton stuffed in their nostrils were incredibly conspicuous. Ryoko walked straight up to the group and carelessly grabbed the leader's long hair. “Hey, boys. I’ve got a little something to ask you.”

“Wh-what the hell are you doing?!” the boy leader fumed with rage.

“I’m not doing anything,” Ryoko said with a smirk. “If you answer my questions quietly, I’ll let you keep your lives.”

“Y-you bitch!”

“Is your brain crashed or something?!”

“Who do you think we are?!”

“I’ll kill you if you mess with us!”

The gang members shouted and all drew knives at once. Judging by the price tags still hanging off some of the knives, it seemed they had rushed to buy them for self-defense after being nearly killed by Violent Tenchi. Already, a crowd of onlookers had gathered around them. Ryoko looked at the agitated gang members calmly and snorted in mockery.

“Hmph. There are too many eyes here to do what I want. Let’s go to a park or something.” She then started walking toward Miyashita Park with her shoulders squared. A lone delinquent girl against ten gang members. Structurally, it was a typical case of the many against the few, but for those who knew Ryoko’s true identity, one might want to advise these unfortunate gang members to call for help from every street gang in Japan.

Of course, the result ended quite predictably, with no miracle occurring. It took less than a minute for the ten gang members to completely lose their fighting spirit and beg for Ryoko's forgiveness while prostrating themselves.

“Big sister, what was your question?! We’ll be happy to answer anything!” The boy leader, who had become a very good boy after having all his front teeth broken, asked energetically and clearly, like a kindergartner speaking to a teacher.

“It’s nothing big,” Ryoko said, looking down at the gang members composedly. “You guys got beaten to a pulp by some outsider kid earlier today, didn't you?!”

“You know it well. Were you watching?”

“Something like that. So, the question is where that opponent is. If you know, I want you to tell me.”

At Ryoko's words, the gang members showed an unexpected reaction. After whispering to each other anxiously, they all rubbed their foreheads against the ground at once. “W-we’re sorry, big sister!” the leader said on behalf of the group, shaking like a newborn colt. “Not knowing he was your companion, w-we did something terrible!”

“What?! What happened?!” Ryoko asked, taken aback.

“To get back at him, we reported him to the police. He was arrested... and is probably at the police station now.”

“Wh-whaaaat...!” Ryoko cried out in shock, turning pale as paper.

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The gang member's words were no lie. Violent Tenchi was in a cell at the Shibuya Police Station.

“Yo, Tenchi... you look well.” Ryoko passed through the wall and appeared inside the holding cell. Violent Tenchi, who had been crouching in the darkness in the corner of the room, looked up and greeted Ryoko with a gloomy, cunning gaze.

“Ryoko, huh... For someone coming to see a ghost, it’s not even a joke for you to pass through a wall like you’re the ghost yourself.”

“Shut up,” Ryoko said bluntly. “Looking closely, you’ve got a face that makes it hard to believe you’re the same person as Tenchi. You look like a villain to the bone. Well, since you look so different, even if you vanish from here, Tenchi won't get busted by the police later. Provided you haven't given them your address or name, that is.”

“I haven't said a thing,” Violent Tenchi replied defiantly. “I just said, ‘I don’t want to cause trouble for my parents.’ And I also told them, ‘It’s a case of mistaken identity, I’m innocent.’ After all, I had a fight with a whole gang; I’m unhurt, while they’re all in pieces. It looks unnatural no matter how you see it. Besides, I’m playing the part of a polite, well-bred boy here, so I’ve made a good impression on the detectives. They’ll believe me over those rough-looking gang members, so I’ll be set free in a day or two.”

“You’re a nasty piece of work,” Ryoko spat.

“Haha, look who’s talking,” Violent Tenchi sneered. “You and I are two of a kind. We’re the same; we both love violence and destruction more than three meals a day.”

Ryoko was silent for a moment. But then, she quietly brushed back her sky-blue hair and her face clouded over as she spoke in a low, somber voice. “If those gang members hadn't run away then... you were seriously going to kill them, weren't you?!”

“Is that wrong?” Violent Tenchi replied nonchalantly. “Are you any different?!”

“I don't fight for real against people who are obviously weaker than me. Moreover, murder isn't my hobby!” Ryoko stared Violent Tenchi down and stated firmly, then grabbed his hand and tried to force him to his feet.

However, Violent Tenchi flicked Ryoko’s hand away. He stood up slowly on his own and showered Ryoko with a piercing, gloomy, upward glance. “...I’m not going back. I’ve had enough of being locked inside that boringly serious Tenchi.”

“What?!”

“Like all humans, he has many faces. A bright face, a kind face, a crafty face, a gloomy face... But in his entire life, my face has never been the 'public' face, and probably never will be. Because all the other faces work together to stop me from coming out. Now that I’ve finally left his body and become free, I’m done with him. From now on, I’m going to have fun in my own way.”

Before long, a cold, cruel, and murderous intent like that of a madman began to rise from Violent Tenchi’s entire body like a heat haze. However, an aura of anger also rose violently from Ryoko’s body with a low rumble like an earthquake. The air in the room became tense as if it had crystallized, and within it, Ryoko and Violent Tenchi glared at each other with sharp gazes.

“...If you’re going to be a spoiled brat, I’ll take you back by force.”

“Do you think you can kill me?!”

“I might be an idiot who makes crying children laugh, but when it comes to fighting, I’m a pro among pros.”

“I’m a tough one,” Violent Tenchi smirked defiantly.

In an instant— “Don't underestimate Ryoko-samaaaaaaa!” Ryoko’s eyes snapped open like a fierce god, and her dazzling aura exploded all at once. “Your weakness is your loweeeeeer baaaaaaack!” A whip-like, ultra-high-speed right middle roundhouse kick sank deep into Violent Tenchi’s waist.

“Gwahaaaaaaa!” Violent Tenchi’s face contorted hideously, and he let out a scream of agony.

On the third Tuesday of June, at 1:44 AM, a mysterious explosion of unknown origin occurred in holding cell B-3 inside the Shibuya Police Station. The room was destroyed, and even the thick outer wall had completely collapsed, telling of the intensity of the blast. When the police rushed in, the youth of unknown name and address who had been detained in that cell had vanished as if spirited away.

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“Now, Tenchi-dono, this is the last one. Drink it all up.” Washu placed the mouth of the empty can from the 'Machine for Injecting Tenchi-dono's Spirit Bodies into his Physical Body' against the lips of the sleeping Tenchi. Tenchi began to drink the contents obediently, like a doll.

“But that last fourth spirit body Tenchi-dono was battered like a rag. You went quite overboard, didn't you?!”

“It’s fine,” Ryoko replied sluggishly to Washu’s question while leaning her exhausted body against the wall and sipping a canned beer. “He’s better off weakened like that for Tenchi’s sake.”

Tenchi, who had received the final separated spirit body into his body, smiled faintly as if relieved and fell into a peaceful sleep. Ryoko looked at Tenchi’s sleeping face. Her gaze was infinitely gentle, filled with love and respect. “Still, Tenchi really is an amazing guy... I’ve fallen in love with him all over again,” Ryoko said deeply.

“What’s this all of a sudden?!”

“Because, you know, he’s been taming those guys with such strong personalities and working hard to make sure they don't come out. That’s a feat I could never pull off. But... if even one of them were missing, he wouldn't be Tenchi anymore. Looking at them one by one, there are annoying ones, pathetic ones, and ones I can’t stand, but all of them together make Tenchi. Just like Washu said, humans are complex and multi-layered things...”

Ryoko thought it was a face she could never tire of looking at. She felt poignantly that she wanted to look at it forever, to always be by his side and see that smile endlessly.

“Serious lines like that don't suit you,” Washu said as she picked up Tenchi and sat his upper body up. “Ryoko, wake him up. We put Tenchi-dono through a lot of trouble, but when he wakes up, he’ll be completely back to normal.”

“Yeah.” Ryoko nodded, then placed her knee against Tenchi’s back and gave him a sharp jolt.

Tenchi’s eyes snapped open. He looked around curiously, and upon noticing Ryoko and Washu, he said in a puzzled but clear voice, “Ryoko, Washu-san... what on earth happened to me...?!”

“Tenchi!” Ryoko, with tears in her eyes, lunged at Tenchi and pinned him to the bed. “Thank goodness! You’re back to normal, Tenchi!”

But Ryoko’s joy turned to despair the next moment. Tenchi was not back to normal. He had not completely regained his former self. Ryoko knew it immediately. Because Tenchi pushed the hovering Ryoko away as if she were a nuisance and said, “Stop it, Ryoko.”

“Eh?!”

“Isn't it rude to suddenly hug someone like that? Even among close friends, there should be courtesy. Even my father or grandpa have never done this to me.”

“T-Tenchi...!” Ryoko stared at Tenchi in a daze. *This isn't Tenchi. He’s still not back to the old Tenchi. Because Tenchi would never do something like this. No matter what happened, he would never push me away. Which means... there’s still another spirit body Tenchi. There’s still a spirit body Tenchi that I failed to recover. Yes, the most important spirit body Tenchi. The Tenchi named 'The Tenchi who likes Ryoko'...!*

“Tenchi-dono’s cold is gone...” It seemed Washu had also reached the same conclusion as Ryoko for a different reason. “That means the spirit body Tenchi-dono who caught the cold is still somewhere! There weren't four spirit body Tenchi-donos, there were five!” Washu looked at the 'Machine for Injecting Tenchi-dono's Spirit Bodies into his Physical Body'. “4.1... should I have rounded that number up instead of off?! No, seeing the machine's perfect operation after that, there’s no way there was an error. 4.1 is definitely 4.1... which means the fifth spirit body Tenchi-dono is 0.1 of a person.”

“What do you mean, 0.1 of a person?” Ryoko asked frantically.

“Maybe... it means he’s incredibly small.”

“Incredibly small...” Ryoko repeated Washu’s words. “In that case, could he still be in this room, unable to get out?!”

“High possibility!” Washu shouted.

Without a moment’s delay, the two began a massive search of the room. Moving furniture, overturning the wastebasket, dumping the contents of desk drawers onto the floor... but the whereabouts of 'The Tenchi who likes Ryoko' remained unknown.

“Wh-what are you doing, Washu-san, Ryoko, in someone else's room... should I help you look for whatever you're searching for?!” As Tenchi tried to get off the bed in amazement, Ryoko’s angry voice rained down on him.

“Tenchi, just stay in bed and be quiet! Listen, the current you isn't a normal body. Something as important as life—well, maybe only to me, but something important nonetheless—is completely missing. So don't go wandering around and just stay—” Ryoko swallowed her words mid-sentence. From somewhere, she heard a faint voice like the buzzing of a mosquito. The voice was saying, “Ryoko... Ryoko... Ryoko... Ryoko...”

Ryoko reflexively looked at her feet. There he was. 'The Tenchi who likes Ryoko' was there. Stuck in a gap in the floorboards and unable to move, he was repeatedly calling Ryoko’s name in a forlorn voice, coughing occasionally. As if symbolizing the current size of Tenchi’s love for Ryoko, his height was only about one centimeter.

“Haha... with him being this small, I actually feel a bit complicated.” Ryoko had a complex smile that seemed to be a mix of joy and loneliness as she plucked up 'The Tenchi who likes Ryoko'. “But without this, he’s not Tenchi.”

Ryoko and Washu exchanged satisfied smiles and nodded. However, Tenchi could not just laugh and overlook it. “Hey, Ryoko! What’s that miniature version of me?! ...Aha. You’ve been teaming up with Washu-san to do something bad to me again, haven't you?! What did you do this time?!”

“This is bad!” Washu shouted in a panic. “Ryoko, put Tenchi-dono to sleep again! We’re starting the work right away!”

“Roger!” Ryoko brilliantly executed the Sky Twister Press—the finishing move of female pro-wrestler Chaparita ASARI—on Tenchi.

On the third Tuesday of June, at 4:48 AM, as the morning star shone in the eastern sky which had turned slightly white through the breaks in the rainy season clouds, Tenchi achieved a complete revival. The long, long, nightmare-like day was over. However, Tenchi, who had achieved fusion with 'The Tenchi who likes Ryoko', naturally caught a cold again as a result. In the end, Tenchi’s cold remained uncured. Everything had returned to square one.

“What was the point of what I did...” Ryoko’s lamentation does not require sympathy. For folly is the only path to the wise.

# The Author’s Commentary

For those of you who accidentally started reading from this page by some mistake, let me ask you a question. What is the difference between "Tenchi" and "Shin Tenchi"? Oh, if you’re thinking, "Wait, I don't know that out of the blue!" please return to the main text immediately. If you are looking at this in a bookstore, please line up at the cash register as quickly as possible. For those of you who are neither... those who started properly from page one and made it here non-stop, I'm sure you already understand. The difference between "Tenchi" and "Shin Tenchi"—more accurately, between Hasegawa’s novel version and Sekijima’s version—lies in the characterization of the protagonist, Tenchi Masaki.

Don't you think the Tenchi in "Shin Tenchi" is quite cool? Furthermore, he’s polite, decisive, moderate, and even good at his studies. His fashion sense is fairly modern, yet he’s natural, giving him a high level of likability. When the time comes, he thinks for himself and acts decisively; he has a strong backbone and a very manly personality. However, as far as romance is concerned, he suddenly becomes like a pure-hearted youth from an old-system high school. Even so, there are proper reasons for him being that way. The Tenchi in "Sakuya’s Confession" is exactly like that, isn't he? "I’m not yet the kind of man who can be a match for such a wonderful girl. So, until I become someone worthy of her, I mustn't step across the line even once. It would be disrespectful to her to take advantage of her kindness and think of anything more than friendship, and more than anything, I couldn't forgive myself for thinking such sneaky things. That’s why... I’ll properly call her 'Kamishiro-san.' Even though I love her so much my heart is full."

If you ask Hasegawa, this cannot be called indecisiveness. Are you really Tenchi-kun? Could you be mixed with the aura of a "pure, upright, and beautiful young man who is rare these days"? It’s no wonder Ryoko, Ayeka, and Sasami fall for him. Where in the world do you find a boy who walks such a straight path today? Oh dear, I’m starting to lose track of whether I’m praising him or teasing him, but it’s certainly not because I’m jealous, ho ho ho... (in the style of Ayeka). Now, as for the author who wrote this kind of Tenchi, "Big Brother" Sekijima, he is also a very fine man with a strong backbone. He has a deep knowledge of the architecture and Buddhist statues of Asuka and Nara, and while he dearly loves Kunio Tsuji and Tarkovsky, he also pours love into martial arts and every gag in this world. (Not to mention he reads everything from the

Man'yoshu to Yutaka Haniya, while also being a railway enthusiast... ah, I can’t write it all down.) His range of interests is something very few others could achieve.

One of his hobbies is touring the used bookstore district of Jinbocho. Having spent his student life there, the Ochanomizu and Kanda areas are like his backyard. Hasegawa has been guided through them several times with his commentary, enjoying conversations about the "myriad things of the universe" while drinking delicious coffee. ...Oh dear. I’ve accidentally used a difficult Han-Chinese term, influenced by Big Brother’s erudition. Since we’ve been acquainted since the days at Tatsunoko Pro when we sat side-by-side as fellow literary staff, I call him "Big Brother," but he is my great senior in both screenwriting and novel writing. Oh, but we are of the same generation. Because of that, our recent topics of conversation range from chipmunks to the pleasures of this world and the sorrows of life... and when you add work complaints, rumors, and boasting about misfortunes... see, it’s the "myriad things," isn't it? No?

Anyway, what I wanted to say was that his wife is also a lovely person, like a young girl, who pours unstinting love into chipmunks... wait, that’s not it (well, it is true), but as Hasegawa, I’m just purely happy to be able to read such an enjoyable "Tenchi." A scriptwriter is someone with the talent to create a one- or two-hour drama from just a tiny fragment of an episode, and in the three short stories collected in this book, one can fully appreciate the mastery of that kind of drama-making. Big Brother Sekijima’s work is, of course, mainly screenwriting, but as Hasegawa, I find myself wishing I could read more of his novels. I’m sure all of you readers feel the same way. If you do, please be sure to write him a letter. Nothing makes a writer happier than the encouragement and letters from readers, after all. Incidentally, Hasegawa has already told him, thanks to our long friendship.

I said: "The mini-mini Tenchi-kun, who got stuck in the gaps of the flooring boards and couldn't move, calling Ryoko’s name over and over with a lonely cough, is the cutest!" ...By the way, Big Brother, that gay yakuza with the magnificent carving of Ninomiya Kinjiro on his back—isn't your usual sense of humor coming out there? I couldn't help but worry that Sasami-chan must have been quite troubled. Well then, I look forward to the next work.

On an autumn night, with a cat comfortably on my lap.

Naoko Hasegawa